THE COMPANY'S SERVANT

A ROMANCE OF SOUTHERN INDIA

By

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Author of

"Diana Barrington," "Her Own People" etc.

"Lord of himself, though not of lands,
And having nothing—yet hath all"

SIR HENRY WOTTON.

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CHAPTER I

" Lord of Himself, though not of lands,
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SIR HENRY WOTTON.

" Man is his own star, and the soul that can,
Render an honest and a perfect man,
Command all light, all influence, all fate,
Nothing to him falls early or too late.
Our acts our angels are, or good or ill,
Our fatal shadows that walk by us still."

BEAUMONT AND FLETCHER.

THE thin mantle of a tropical night still enshrouded the district of the Shezada in Southern India. Yet although the land lay wrapped in sleep, dawn was approaching with swift and stealthy footsteps ; heralded by the whisperings of a timid breeze, and the notes of wakening birds, it appeared with a sudden flash of yellow light, glimmering along the horizon.

As the magical moment arrived, there was an almost imperceptible pause, the curtain of darkness was about to be withdrawn—what would it reveal ? When shadows were rolled aside, and the sky became transformed into a blaze of gold, there was exposed no scene of shining water, feathery palms or towering temples ; merely a flat, monotonous plain, and an ordinary whitewashed railway station.

To the left, lay a flock of tents (Government pattern), to the right, the outline of a large settlement; beyond, at some distance, could be descried the low roofs, and grey blue smoke, of a straggling bazaar, and on a rock frowning over all, the ruins of a malevolent Mahratta fort.

A prominent board on the station platform displays its name and district in English and Tamil characters, which latter resemble a key pattern in Greek embroidery. "Tani-Kul," a well-known junction, enjoys a wide reputation for its clean white beds, real tea, excellent curry, and succulent popodams—it is also the head quarters of the staff of one of the most important lines in India; but beyond this fact, Tani-Kul and its champions maintain a discreet silence. The surrounding country, as far as the eye can reach, presents nothing to hold attention—merely a grim expanse of black cotton soil, displaying neither tree nor shrub to break the melancholy monotony.

In fact, short of the arid Steppes of Central Asia, a more desolate, God-forsaken locality it would be impossible to find. Dried by long centuries of cloudless heat, these miles of hopeless waste strike a note of dismay, and even awe in the minds of passing travellers.

This the gorgeous East! Well, at least there remained the gorgeous Sun, and he was doing his utmost to gild the miserable landscape, beaming impartially on the bright, bare rails, the coolies' brown bodies, the white station walls, and dusty "Station Creeper"—that kind-hearted purple flower which flourishes on bricks and mortar, and worthily deserves the name of "Travellers' Joy." The Junction was now astir, doors were opened, officials were emerging, a withered hag with a mop of grizzled hair and a scanty saree, was sweeping out a waiting-room; a Bheestie with his

mussuk was watering the platform, and in the refreshment department, a yawning Goanese boy, with a white duck jacket and ostentatious chain, clattered among breakfast cups, preparing for passengers; whilst just outside, a native colleague was sitting on his heels, toasting slices of Bazaar bread over a charcoal fire. Two lean cows, with their inevitable calves, were also in attendance, in order to contribute to the Chotah Hazree of the *Sahib Log*.

The station now displayed a crowded and animated appearance; here were vendors of sweets, of water, fruit, and cheroots, not a few gaping idlers, several bare-legged, be-muslined baboos, and last, but by no means least, a group of pretty girls, who were whispering and tittering round the bookstall of Wheeler & Co.

Aloof at the far end of the platform, two men stood together, gazing up the line with an air of expectation; both wore the official white drill suit and helmet, as well as the assured bearing of those who are on their own ground. The elder was a muscular, long-armed veteran, with a greyish beard, high cheek-bones and twinkling little blue eyes. Tim Coffey, once a private in the Inniskillings, had obtained his discharge when the regiment went home, and betaken his powerful frame, and several good conduct stripes, into civil employ. He was now platform superintendent (a sort of glorified head-porter), and with Katty his wife occupied comfortable quarters, into which they received bachelor guards. His present companion was one of these officials, as indicated by a black leather belt and collar badge. John Vernon was a man whose exact age it was rather difficult to estimate; the Plains of India and an anxious and strenuous calling had imprinted their traces on his clean-cut features—Vernon might be twenty-five, he might be thirty; his mouth

was a little stern, but he had a boyish laugh, an active, young, and well-knit figure. The hand that shaded a pair of steady brown eyes, though hard and tanned, was admirably kept; the handkerchief stuffed into his cuff no mere cotton rag, but of good linen texture—one not to be disclaimed, however found; his boots were irreproachable and his uniform spotless. With respect to this latter fact, it must be admitted that Vernon was secretly the darling of Katty Coffey's heart, she mothered him, scolded him, mended for him, precisely as if he had been her own son, and exhibited shameless partiality when allotting the best cup of tea, the choicest fruit, the freshest eggs.

All women liked Vernon! He was good-looking, courteous, reserved, a little shy, and unconsciously possessed the faculty of arousing interest. The young man was earning one hundred and fifty rupees a month (besides overtime)—he had been promoted from Perambore three years previously, bringing with him an excellent character for capacity, initiative, and steadiness—but beyond Perambore he had no record. His comrades and the working staff promptly realized that "the chap from Perambore" was different to them in various ways (he himself was conscious of some inherited tendencies, which did not match his surroundings), but as Vernon was good-tempered, friendly and sporting, he soon became popular in Tani-Kul, and fell into the iron groove of its daily routine.

"Begor, she's the early late train!" exclaimed Coffey, thereby revealing his nationality; "she won't be up this half-hour, being only signalled now from Jolapett. Bad cess to her for upsettin' all the goods and mixed passengers, not to spake of the Pilgrims' Special."

"She was probably delayed in the Koddur cutting," replied the guard, whose speech betrayed the fact that

he was a gentleman, "and you must make allowance for a steep gradient, and a heavy troop train."

"Shure, an' don't I know that? an' wasn't I often on one meself?" rejoined Coffey. "Bedad, 'tis I could tell ye many a quare thing of a troop train, and och! the tales I've heard aboard of them would curl yer hair."

"I believe these are the Paladin Lancers from England to Bangalore," remarked the other inconsequently.

"They are so," drawing out a short pipe, "an' I mind them well, when they were out before—lyin' next to us at Secunderabad. Nice 'boyos' for racing, and gambling and divilment! but a rale fine regiment. Faix, that's seventeen year ago, this cold weather."

"So you are not likely to come across any old pals, are you, Tim?"

"No, though you never can rightly tell who will turn up, an' it's extraordinary the power of folks that does be passing through here, coming and going. I'm mighty glad I am on the main line, though this Junction is as ugly and as hot as hell—an' that ye know yourself. Still, there's always something stirring; what with the mail train robberies, and dead bodies found in carriages, and lots of passengers, and pilgrims and convicts, and troops of sightseers—not to speak of nuns—a good bit of life goes by, though no one would think it, to see us of a Sunday morning. Bedad, it's the troop trains that bring the women out—will ye look at the crowd of 'em to-day?"

Vernon, who was still contemplating the long track, lined with grey-green cactus hedges, turned as requested and glanced behind him. Yes, the station seemed half filled with gaily-dressed spectators, European and Eurasian, wearing their smartest blouses, and their Sunday hats.

"See, there's Jessie Sharratt," resumed Coffey, "and Irene Pereira—and the Tanzys' Rosita!" He accompanied the last name with a significant prod of his iron thumb.

"Who is driving the troop train?" inquired Vernon, ignoring this information.

"Oh—Fraser, and there's no patches on *his* fire-box! That chap has a great nerve, gets the credit for all the fast runs, and bangs along at sixty miles an hour—he'll not draw much out of this one, I'm thinkin'. There's Madame Tanzy, come down to boss the whole business, detraining *and* inspection; and Collins, the Commissariat Sergeant, with a face on him like a raw ration."

"Collins seems pretty well done!" remarked Vernon, as a man, with his helmet on the back of his head, hurried along, mopping with a red handkerchief an equally red face.

"Begor, he has his hands full, the poor divil—what with the Rest Camp, five hundred and ninety men, including officers' ladies, and women, all on his mind! His work is squeezed into a few weeks in the year, and then it's a job for forty. I'll go round by and by to the camp, and have a 'bukh' with the chaps; the sight of a sojer raises the heart in me. See!" and he paused dramatically, "there's Gojar the night watchman; now what the puck is he doing here? The women folk like to see the officers and ladies, as is natural; and as for meself, it's only in raison I'd be interested in troops, but will ye mind the curiosity of that long, slithering nigger?"

"He looks terribly ill," remarked Vernon, as his eyes followed the direction of Coffey's huge hand, and surveyed a tall, gaunt native, who stood a solitary figure on the opposite platform, gazing up the line with an air of intelligent expectation. He wore an

enormous blue turban, loose dungaree trousers and coat, and a wide leather belt; his carriage was erect and even dignified, but his face, though half hidden by a hairy black beard, looked emaciated, and his piercing dark eyes were deeply sunken in his head.

"He is a strange glum sort of fellow," continued the guard, "and seems to have no pals."

"The dog is his pal—the crabbed terrier that was left behind, and thinks himself a gentleman; he mislikes natives, but he has took kindly to Gojar, and the dog is all the pal *he* wants," declared Coffey. "He's a fine worker, and it's a pity he is killing himself smoking Ganja—'tis ten times worse nor opium! That Gojar, he lives hid away in the Bazaar, and sometimes he goes sick, and no one lays an eye on him for days, and then he comes dragging back—just a pure walking skeleton. However, he is a dependable watchman—so they put up with his wakeness, and don't fire him out. D'ye hear the cough of him? That's the real Ganja smoker's cough, and it'll never leave him till he is under the soil."

"Poor devil!" ejaculated Vernon.

"Aye, and he's a fine figure of a man too—a Pathan, they say. You are not on in this job?" said Coffey, nodding his head towards the up line.

"No, I'm taking the 9.30 to the Junction, and they will be gone when I come back to-night."

"Here they are!" announced Coffey, "she's signalled, and I'm off. I must get shut of some of the crowd on the platform," and turning away, Tim began to exert his authority in a forcible mixture of a Cork brogue and the Tamil tongue.

His companion, who followed him slowly, was accosted near the waiting-room by a pretty, dark-eyed girl, who tapped him on the arm with the handle of her sunshade.

"So you have come to see the regiment, Miss Fontaine," he said, and his lips relaxed into a smile.

Rosita Fontaine, a beautiful little French Eurasian, sparkled and giggled as she answered.

"Yes—but oh, Mr. Vernon, will you be so amiable as to do something for me? It is a parcel—it should have come by last night's passenger, *et je suis au désespoir!*" and she made a gesture with her graceful shoulders.

"Oh, it's only her shoes for the dance to-night!" explained Jessie Sharratt, a tall, thin damsel, with sandy hair, and a pale clever face. "Rosita is so particular and fussy about her things. She says she will *die* if she does not have those shoes in time! Gold shoes from Madras."

"Gold shoes!" repeated the guard; "never heard of such things—I've read of glass slippers."

"Oh, but gold shoes are awfulee fashionable this long, long time," put in Irene Pereira, a handsome dark-eyed girl who stood behind Rosita, her crude good looks and gaudy toilette utterly eclipsed by the other's dazzling daintiness, "and if diamond shoes were worn, Rosita would want them too—she is so awfulee extravagant. Oh my, how she loves to spend!"

"I spend—oh *mon Dieu!* what a thing to say!" protested Rosita with shrill indignation. "You make such a fuss about poor me—these shoes are a present from Madame Panache, an old lady in Pondicherry, who adores me—and is, oh, so good and kind! You will get them for me, Mr. Vernon—you are so clever," and she gazed at him with a captivating smile in her irresistible eyes.

"I will do my best," he answered. "I'll telegraph to the Junction, and if they have been delayed there, they will be here to-night—but you must pay me, Miss Rosita."

"I pay—oh," she cried, surveying him with the troubled gravity of a child, "how—in what way?"

"In dances—I'll take out the price in waltzes—say two; one for each shoe."

Jessie and the other girl burst into a shriek of laughter, and Jessie said:

"Why, Rosita's card was filled up in *ink* a week ago!"

"It is true," confessed Rosita, with a blush; "but you know very well, Mr. Vernon, you said you would not be here—you had a round to Jolapett on this date—and of course I did not keep any for you—it would have been *une sottise!*"

"That's all right, but you see I managed an exchange with Hawkins—I'll take over all his dances."

"Hawkins!" repeated Rosita, with a gesture of scorn, "I never dance with him—*jamais!—jamais!*—a water buffalo would be a better partner. No, but now look—" and she pouted with the air of one granting a concession. "I will give you the Circassian Circle—*voilà!*"

"Not in my line, thanks—a waltz for each shoe, those are my terms, and one of them the Valse Bleu."

"But now you are impossible! Oh, *c'est impossible!*" flinging out her hands. "What am I to do?—without shoes—I go not to the dance—and you make a bargain, that I—cheat my partners."

"You can always do that—no one better," declared Jessie Sharratt; "you have brought it to a fine art. Come, Rosita, do not be such an affected humbug—why you chuck half a dozen a night!"

"Oh, Jessie, what a story!" protested the beauty. "Well then, I suppose it must be so;—two shoes—two waltzes. Of course I like to dance with you, Mr. Vernon—*c'est entendu*—but to break my promise is dreadful. Ah *voilà!* here they come!" and Rosita

pushed forward excitedly, as a crowded dusty train thundered over the points and ran along the platform.

Vernon instantly became the grave, alert official—whilst Tim Coffey's voice was audible above all sounds as he hurried by the carriages, shouting:

"Tani-Kul! Tani-Kul! Tani-Kul!"

CHAPTER II

THE arrival and departure of troops was no surpassing novelty at Tani-Kul, for in the days of John Company it had been a well-known Rest Camp—indeed, here, not a few men of the stalwart battalions which came marching up the great trunk road, had rested altogether! Forage caps and heavy accoutrements, invited sunstroke or apoplexy, and there were numerous mounds of no uncertain shape in the neighbourhood of an ancient Dâk Bungalow. Tani-Kul had existed centuries before the Southern India "fire" carriages had come flaring by, bringing into its dull existence, excitement, money, and traffic; and long years before the station had been built, Tani-Kul was marked (in contemptuously small print) upon the map of Hindustan.

Now, beside a "pucka" railway station, with its surrounding goods sheds, and engine-houses, there was a large settlement of railway employés, on whom an excellent school, reading-room, and Institution, had been conferred by the generous Company; dances, concerts, theatricals, and Divine Service were held impartially in "The Ballroom," for Tani-Kul boasted considerable European, and Eurasian, population. This oasis in the midst of leagues of black cotton soil

was a self-engrossed little world; as full of joys and sorrows, hate and fear, love and ambition, as any community of ten times its celebrity, and attractions. There was a strange contrast between its bustling activity, and the surrounding melancholy, far-reaching, plains.

Be it known, that Tani-Kul the isolated, was by no means blasé; it promoted theatricals, and even bazaars, on the smallest encouragement, and eagerly accepted challenges to cricket, tennis, or any little change or amusement that came in its way. When the cold weather "moves" began, and the standing camp was pitched, many of the women-folk flocked to the station in order to inspect and criticize the trim, well-set-up Tommies, with their hearty voices, confident air and swinging gait; the smart officers, with spurs and clattering swords, the officers' wives, in fashionable garments, their fans and tea baskets, and cushions. In January, these delicate ladies appeared to be overpowered by the heat—such affectation! for Tani-Kul clung to the delusion that in the cold weather months, its climate was European!

As the Paladin Lancers fell in on the platform, and marched off at a sonorous word of command, the walls and palings of the station yard were lined at least six deep by chattering natives, dark women in gaudy sarees, and nose rings, bandy-wallahs, hawkers, coolies, beggars—all agape at the "gorrah-log" who tramped by them in a cloud of white dust. The ladies of the railway, telegraph and traffic, wives and families of guards and engine-drivers, had not failed to be present in their freshest muslins, and most flowery hats; for the moment, they stood humbly in the background—although the station was more or less their property—and inspected the horde of strangers, who made their usually humdrum Tani-Kul a bustling, hustling English

terminus. For once, England in khaki and leather, tanned, well-groomed and disciplined, was in possession of the premises.

The camp being within a few minutes' walk, there was no need of conveyance for the lady travellers, who had consequently to run the gauntlet of the resident womenkind, as one by one they passed forth. First, the Colonel's wife, a tall, arrogant individual, with a handsome horse-like face, wearing a silk dust-cloak, and the latest edition of a sun hat. She was attended by a thin, discontented maid, naturally unhappy in black alpaca and a close bonnet. The maid was followed by the Riding Master's wife; harassed, flushed, and a little shrill, accompanied by an Ayah, an infant and two small, white-faced girls, wearing enormous mushroom topees, and very scanty skirts. Last, came the bride of the Adjutant, in all the glories of an Indian trousseau; a rich man's spoiled child, whose quick brown eyes surveyed her surroundings—squatting hags chewing betel-nut, noisy hawkers, and nude children—with an expression of incredulous disgust. Here ended the procession, for the Paladins were not a marrying regiment, and the Colonel (strange to say) was inflexible in his decree, that if a man married, he must immediately exchange.

Chief among the railway spectators, and standing forward most obtrusively, were Mrs. Sharratt, wife of the station-master, and Madame Tanzy, wife of a leading fitter. These matrons were the rival queens of the settlement; each had her following, her favourites, confidantes, and parasites; each her schemes, resources, and drawbacks. Their attitude towards one another resembled that of two armies, ever manœuvring for some advantage, and ever hoping to steal a victory unawares. Nevertheless, it was not a case of open war; outwardly they maintained a decent neutrality, inquired after one

another's health when they met, exchanged Christmas cards, and, at long intervals, formal calls.

Mrs. Sharratt was a plain, stout matron, with scanty drab-coloured hair, a wide parting, and a short neck. She had received a fair education, and strict upbringing; traces of these had become somewhat faded, after twenty-two years' residence in an enervating climate. She was dull, and touchy, but a kind-hearted, good woman *au fond;* indeed her impulsive generosity occasionally led to the verge of self-denial, and yet so much for a nimble tongue, and smart appearance, Madame Tanzy's paltry favours were received with far more enthusiasm and gratitude. Nevertheless, Mrs. Sharratt was the more important of the two; but the poor stupid woman did not understand how to profit socially by her position and dignity as consort of the station-master, drawing two hundred and fifty rupees a month—not to speak of residing in a fine bungalow, with three bathrooms. Although officially her status was unquestioned, she had ever an uneasy conviction that Madame Tanzy was secretly undermining her throne, and working against her, "*moleing*," as she expressed it, and incessantly labouring to come out on top; now with a card party, now with a new dress, and sooner or later with a splendid match for Rosita! When Mrs. Sharratt beheld her foe sailing about, doing the honours of the settlement functions, she felt powerless. She had not, as she complained, "the health for dress, dancing, and gadding," much less the "nerve" to tell big, bare-faced lies. She was well aware that people thought far more of Madame Tanzy than of herself, "though Tanzy had only one hundred and fifty a month, and she next door to black, but terribly clever;" however, one thing was sure, Madame Tanzy should never get her foot in, or be noticed by the Line. The traffic superintendent's lady, and the chief

engineer's lady, had always called on *her*, and heard Jessie play the piano, but they never went near the Tanzys—and never would! Tanzy was a subordinate, and Sharratt had a good deal in his power; it would be no fault of hers, if the Tanzys did not get a shunt. Madame Tanzy was a little lying busybody, with a finger in everyone's pie, and carried on, and dressed and talked, just as if she was some grand Mem Sahib. As for Rosita—though Jessie liked her—everyone knew that she was spoiling all the girl's chances, and driving the men to drink.

Yet notwithstanding these ungracious sentiments, Mrs. Sharratt had this very morning cordially shaken hands with her enemy, and remarked how well she was looking! Certainly Madame Tanzy presented a complete contrast to her rival; she was a little dark Frenchwoman from Pondicherry, who, when a vivacious beauty in her 'teens, had captured the affections of Tanzy, a big, honest, stolid Englishman—possibly because she was the exact opposite to himself, being small, volatile, and consumed by a restless energy. Even now, though withered and sallow, her eyes were bright and alive, her teeth still young and white; Madame Tanzy made the most of her appearance and opportunities, having inherited the *chic* and taste of her French forebears. Handicapped by race (that is to say, a little colour), she was infinitely more attractive to the eye than her moon-faced, bulky rival; her trim little figure was admirably set off by a dainty cotton gown, her still abundant hair was crowned by a straw hat, coquettishly trimmed with a coloured scarf. "Madame" Tanzy, as she was called, still possessed the vitality of youth, the determination to enjoy life at forty-five, and a far-reaching, and not too scrupulous ambition. Although Tanzy was a dull plodding man, with no relish for anything outside his special depart-

ment, and although she could not, like Mrs. Sharratt, speak of Europe as "*home*," yet Madame had undoubtedly the best of it, in the social struggle!—her strenuous personality dominated Tani-Kul.

Men enjoyed her cookery and her conversation—they were equally piquant and spicy. She was, notwithstanding this fact, popular with her own sex, for she understood the art of subtle flattery, and her opinions on the matter of dressmaking, and millinery, were final and unquestioned.

Madame delighted in organization: she managed triumphantly the Book Club, and the Mutton Club; promoted theatricals, and maintained the stage wardrobe. She was also the treasurer and secretary of badminton, tennis, and whist tournaments; collected and disposed of the money for prizes—and oh, greatest boon of all—secured a weekly supply of fresh vegetables from Bangalore, which she retailed to a grateful, and greedy community.

Why, it may be asked, did Madame undertake all these offices, and so much unnecessary trouble? Was it for the pure love of her fellow creatures? By no means; the position of general provider of literature, amusements, green vegetables, and tender joints, assured her a position of importance. Whenever she distributed salad and strawberries, elderly novels, or new tennis balls, somehow the impression conveyed, was, that this bright-eyed little woman was endowing her associates with her own property!

As a moral and social guide, Madame Tanzy was readily forthcoming, and prepared at a moment's notice to console, advise, encourage, or, above all, arbitrate!

Mrs. Sharratt and her friends declared that Madame's mother was an Ayah, that she intrigued, and lied, and made quantities of rupees on the sly. Yes, out of the vegetables and prize-money!—that she cooked the

accounts as dexterously as she cooked an omelette, and they even went so far as to say that her character was not all that might be desired, and that her relative, Rosita Fontaine, would undoubtedly come to a bad end.

Nevertheless, and in spite of these abominable calumnies, Madame Tanzy held her head high, and governed the station, with one notable exception, and that, astonishing as it may appear, was her own niece.

Clustered around the two principal matrons, were various others, of different ages, shades, and degrees; and conspicuously in advance of the group (so like her boldness) stood Rosita Fontaine; the background of elderly women with dusky complexions, or white, climate-worn faces, offered a high contrast to her fresh and dazzling loveliness. She looked like some vivid, brilliant flower surrounded by faded leaves. Rosita, at the age of eighteen, was beautiful as a dream, and undoubtedly her charms were hereditary. One of her ancestors, a gallant officer and peer of France, had fought under Lally, and subsequently, like his leader, perished on the scaffold. His descendants—with the blood of a West Coast woman in their veins—had settled at Pondicherry, and there slowly ebbed from high to low condition. Jules Fontaine, Rosita's father, clever, thrifty and hardworking, had been a clerk in a wine merchant's office, but the death of his wife from cholera broke up his home, and he returned to Lyons, after consigning "La Petite Rose" to the care of his wife's sister, and the good nuns. Two years previously, Rosita—volatile, secretive and ambitious—had left the convent, a finished pupil, an accomplished coquette, and had brought that dangerous element, her extraordinary beauty, to amaze, inflame, exasperate and embroil commonplace Tani-Kul.

Alas! not a few young men and women now realized for the first time, what it was to have an aching heart, thanks to the supreme attractions of the irresistible Rosita.

There was no flaw in her graceful figure, the chiselled perfection of her features, or her radiant smile. On the present occasion, her exquisite face and dark romantic eyes were shaded by a charming hat of soft pink muslin; she also wore a dainty cambric gown, and an air of enchanting innocence.

Not a few men's glances were drawn to this magnetic vision as in the forefront of the crowd she stood a few steps from the station entrance, and it occurred to several capable judges, that this slim girl on Tani-Kul platform, had a more generous endowment of the "Fatal Gift," that any woman they had ever seen—and their experience was wide.

What colouring! what lashes! what eyes!—these seemed to illuminate the whole place. Some of the Tommies nudged one another, as they tramped forth, with a muttered "Eyes Right!"

At last troops were gone, the final coolie had trotted off with his load, the dust began to settle, and peace and leisure once more descended on the station. By half-past six o'clock, the spectators had dispersed, the troop train, shunted into a siding, made way for ordinary traffic, and civil activities were suffered to predominate. Indeed the platform was now in possession of natives who had hitherto been sitting on their heels, patient and motionless—enjoying from a distance the new and varied sights; these thronged in, with a horde of friends to speed them, carrying their worldly goods in bundles, and arguing, gesticulating and wrangling. Finally after deafening and maddening confusion, they were herded into long, third-class-carriages, and rested content. To a native a journey

is a festivity, and an agreeable and exhilarating recreation. The Indian lines carry third-class passengers in enormous numbers, and at marvellously low rates, and this "Special," which conveyed pilgrims for Tirupati, presently steamed out of the station, so crammed, that the very windows were a seething mass of arms and heads.

Once more there was a temporary lull, a breathing space, and Coffey's authoritative voice ceased to vociferate, "Ourria!"—"Ourria!"—"Shigarum!"—"Shigarum!" which is, being interpreted, "Hurry—hurry—get on—get on!"

John Vernon, who was running headlong from the telegraph office, collided in the doorway with a stout, dapper little officer, and breathlessly jerked out:

"Beg pardon, sir—sorry!"

The other, after giving him a hasty glance, suddenly halted, and exclaimed, in a loud voice:

"Talbot—by Jove!"

CHAPTER III

At the exclamation of "Talbot, by Jove!" the guard halted as if struck by an unexpected blow, he grew white, but instantly recovered his self-possession, and with simulated deafness, was about to pass on and effect his escape.

"No, no—look here, Jack; hold on a minute, will you?" urged the soldier authoritatively; "if you are not Jack Talbot who was with me at Barton's, and Dodd's the Crammer's, I'll eat my boots."

"Beg pardon, sir—don't you think you're making some mistake?" was the stolid reply.

"There! the voice settles it! Come out of that, you old ostrich," and Captain Breakspeare seized a reluctant hand and wrung it vigorously. "I say, Talbot, don't be now, what you never were—an ass! What are you doing in this galley?"

"Excuse me, sir," he answered with a wooden face, "but my name is Vernon."

"Excuse me, sir," repeated the other, "but my name is Breakspeare. We were in the same preparatory school—the same form—and in the same scrapes! Upon my soul, John, I really wonder you can stand there, staring me in the face and denying your own identity—come now—own up!"

The guard's reply was to move towards the door, but his friend, who was persistent, followed him closely through the surging crowd on the platform, and into the now empty second-class waiting-room.

"I often wondered where you had got to," he began, a little out of breath.

Vernon turned on him sharply, and said in an angry voice.

"Well—now you know—I hope to God you'll keep it to yourself."

"Of course I will, old man, if you wish it, but why? Lots of your pals would be glad to hear of your whereabouts. I remember your scrapes of old; generally mine too—and not an ounce of harm—pure animal spirits. When you went to live with your uncle, it was no secret that times were changed—you had beastly hard luck in your exams., but you'd have pulled through some day—why look at *me*—plucked three times!" and he took off his helmet, and mopped his head.

Meanwhile Vernon stood gazing at him, white-faced and speechless, and his schoolfellow returned the gaze with interest. Jack was altered—the marks of climate,

conflict, and endurance, had beaten themselves into his face—he looked years older than his age.

"We heard at Dodd's," continued the new-comer, "that your uncle cut up most awfully rough last time you were spun, that you were not coming back, then, suddenly, that you had cleared out of the country, after some holy row, and no one knew where you had gone to—no, not till this day! I wrote, and Mansell wrote, and so did Grimthorpe, and Stopford—never a line. We tried to sound your folks—never a clue. They talked some rot of being done with you, and of a disgraceful story, but that would not be your form, Jack, you are not clever enough to be a rascal, and we all believed you were at your old game—pulling the chestnuts out of the fire for someone else, eh?"

"Well, yes, that was about the truth, Tony."

"And you never gave one of us half a chance, or——"

"I was not given half a chance myself," he interrupted impatiently. "I was hustled out of the country in twenty-four hours."

"Good Lord—and for what?"

"For something I had no more to say to than you had—but never mind, it's an old story now—my relations have done with me, and I, thank God, have done with them. You would have stuck to me, so would others, but I was a dog with a bad name, and I was thrown out into the world with that stone round my neck, to sink or swim—and I am still swimming. It's awfully good of you, Tony," and he hesitated—his frank, brown eyes looked misty, and his firm mouth quivered, "to believe in me. Here I am, just Jack Vernon the guard; I have carved out a new career. You remember long ago how my governor always said I was to go into the Guards—well, I *am* in the Guards! a gazetted official. I managed the exam.—you know,

I never had much brains, and how military law and mathematics used to floor me; but I've enough wit for this job, and I am getting on all right."

"Oh, are you?" exclaimed his friend. "You, Jack Talbot, a crack rider and cricketer, 'getting on' as a guard, on a scorching Indian railway. Here, let's clear out of this place—it stinks of cocoanut oil—and come over to my tent."

"I am sorry I can't—I am just going on duty, it's my round."

"And for how long?"

"Twelve hours."

Captain Breakspeare gave a loud whistle.

"We shall have left by the time you are back."

"Yes, you go by the 4.45."

"And is this all I am to see or hear of you, Jack?"

"Well, it's awfully bad luck it has happened so. Yours is the first old face I have laid eyes on for years."

"And you were by no means pleased to see it!"

"I suppose I'm a bit thin-skinned; I've done with John Talbot and his history—as published elsewhere—and I want to keep my new character, and lead my own life, beholden to none."

"But tell me, *what* have you been doing? Where have you been—not here all the time, I should hope?" and Captain Breakspeare cast a glance of angry scorn round the refreshment-room.

"Oh no, I tried the Cape first—no good—I'm not clever or pushing. I'd no trade, and I put in rather a bad time there, tram conductor and odd jobs—so then I came to Bombay, and got a billet in a jute factory. I held on for about a year, and it nearly killed me—you see I was used to outdoor life, and I could not stand the machinery and the fluff and the heat; I went sick, and in the Jamsetjee Hospital I

happened to be in the next cot to a guard on the G.I.P. He put me up to this sort of job, and I started with thirty-five rupees a month as 'Goods'—now I'm head, and drawing a hundred and fifty."

"Not married, Jack? Eh? You have still a detached air."

Vernon shook his head and laughed.

"And you, Tony?"

"Do I look it?" demanded Captain Breakspeare indignantly; "beside, our old man is death on matrimony. I say, we shall be in Bangalore a couple of years—you must come up and stay with me—I suppose you get leave?"

"Yes, a fortnight, and once in a blue moon, a month. It's awfully good of you, Tony, but I really don't see how you could smuggle me into the Mess—unless as waiter."

"Bosh! Well, if you won't come and stay with me—I'll come and stay with you. You'll write, won't you?"

He nodded.

"What sort of pals have you hereabouts?"

"Oh, all kinds—the regular railway lot are a good sort, and hold together through thick and thin—old soldiers—artisans—a few come-downers—fellows from the salt—failures in tea—we've had University men."

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Captain Breakspeare, "and the women? Oh, by Jove, that reminds me. I saw an amazingly pretty face just now, under a pink hat. I declare my heart is thumping still! Who is she? I suppose you know who I mean?"

"Oh yes—Rosita Fontaine—the beauty of the station."

"The railway station bell! There's a joke. It seemed to me she was pretty enough to be the belle of any number of stations. I say, look here, Jack, I

grant the beauty and the glamour ; and you always had your head fairly well screwed on—don't go and lose it, and tie yourself down by marrying a girl of her class."

"I've no what you call class now, 'I'm just a working-man,' the Company's servant."

For a moment Captain Breakspeare surveyed his friend with cool, dispassionate scrutiny, then he said :

"And is this going to be your station in life, Jack ? Do you mean to tell me you are engaged to the little dark-eyed witch ? "

"No ; and I would not be much of a match for her —if I was ! "

"I suppose you are the only gentleman—I mean man of good birth—in the place ? "

"Perhaps I am, just now, but all manner of odds and ends such as myself, drift into the railway. We have had a Doctor of Law and a baronet working in the goods shed, and one of our locomotive foremen is married to a lady—yes, a real lady. She was a hospital nurse out here, but her health broke down."

"I've no doubt you are rather chummy—sort of fellow feeling makes us wondrous kind, eh ? "

"What rot, Tony. We are good friends, she is of my own class, knows places I've been to, and we lend one another books, and that's all there's 'to it,' as the Yankees say."

"Mind yourself, John Talbot ; between the dark-eyed beauty and the sympathetic nurse——"

"Time's up," he announced suddenly, looking at his watch, "and I must be off, Tony," and he held out his hand ; "you don't know how this talk has given me a lift—just to see a face from my old life, and to find you the same good sort."

"We must manage to meet again before long, Jack, and oh, I say," hesitating for a moment, "tell me, old chap, are you hard up ? "

"No, thank you, I'm all right, you'll hardly believe it—but I'm saving!"

"Wish I could say as much! I would not be out East—only for the rupees—and my tailor."

Here a man entered and made a sign to Vernon, who, with an abrupt gesture of farewell, hastily took his departure.

CHAPTER IV

THE schoolfellows separated and went their several ways; the guard, to his dusty, glaring journey, carrying his waybills, valuable parcels, line clear tickets, and various anxieties; Captain Breakspeare to the duty of seeing to his men, and receiving reports from his troop sergeant. After a tub, and change into a cool linen suit, he was resting in his tent (the usual Jubbulpore pattern, with that monotonous yellow and brown lining so familiar to the English Army), reclining in a long chair and enjoying a cheroot. Suddenly the flap was raised, and a tall young fellow stooped his head and entered.

"Thundering hot!" he exclaimed, as he removed his helmet, mopped his brow and seated himself on the camp cot. "How goes it, Tony? Fairly well—*I* should say."

"Oh, fairly—I commenced the day with an adventure."

"An adventure," repeated the visitor, pausing in the act of selecting a cigarette, and gazing round the tent, "cobra—or scorpion?"

"Neither—I met an old chum, and schoolfellow. He is a guard here. I came across him in the station, an hour ago."

"Ah! And got rid of him promptly—I see," remarked Mr. Pascoe, now stretching himself comfortably at full length on the cot.

"Not a bit of it—he got rid of me!"

"Well, you know, Tony, you *are* a bit of a bore sometimes," Mr. Pascoe paused to contemplate the rings of smoke, and then resumed, "Chap come to grief—bad lot—borrowed coin—eh?"

"Not he, poor devil. I dare not offer to help him. The change in his circumstances is, unless I'm an idiot, his misfortune, not his fault."

"And some other Johnny, going scot-free, has stuck him in this awful inferno?"

"I fancy so—I think that about puts the matter in a nutshell."

"But who is the individual when he is at home?"

"Talbot is his name—his father was Colonel Talbot, brother of Lord Rotherham."

"By Jove! So he is Rotherham's nephew!"

"Yes, Colonel Talbot had a place called Whitegates, near my people. He was a good-looking, easy-going sort; a capital rider, awfully proud of Jack, and very free with his tips. I remember he gave me my first sovereign, and I nearly fainted! Mrs. Talbot was a delicate little woman you could blow away, with a pretty brogue, and lovely Irish eyes. Jack was my playfellow—our nurses were pals—we made mud pies on the same plan, and bird-nested, gave one another whooping-cough and measles, and went to the same preparatory school, Barton's. Jack was great—a big gun at cricket, and footer, and awfully generous. He had lots of pocket-money, and when at home, a couple of hunters and a gun."

Here Captain Breakspeare paused for breath.

"Go ahead," urged his listener, now alert and interested.

"It happened just before Christmas—the smash; some awful money muddle, and an avalanche of debts. Colonel Talbot died suddenly—whether suicide or heart failure I don't know—anyway, whatever it was, it killed Mrs. Talbot. Poor Jack came back after the holidays in deep mourning and most terribly down on his luck. His father had done two foolish things—trusted a scoundrel, and put all his eggs into one basket. Whitegates was sold up, and Jack was dependent on his uncle for his education, and every single blessed thing! I was invited to the castle at Easter, and made the acquaintance of Lord Rotherham—a man with a big nose, a grey face and a long upper lip; we were not congenial: he thought me a most objectionable cub—and I put in a deadly week. The place was all over footmen, and gongs—you know the style—everything very stiff and formal. There was a son older than us, a lanky, tallow-faced youth, always stuck in a book, and would not get on a horse to save his life. I played various tricks on him, which were a splendid success—I could not say the same for myself—I broke a malachite vase, and a looking-glass, and Jack was not allowed to return my visit, as I was considered a 'bad influence.' When I went to Eton, Jack went to Charterhouse, but we had the good luck to be in the same Militia, and at the same Crammer's, Dodd's. I thought him changed; as if all his go and spirit had been frozen out of him. He told me his uncle could not bear the sight of him, and he intended to work hard to get into the Service, and away, and be on his own hook. He was simply wild to pass into the Army—he did work—but he was spun in mathematics. His uncle was awfully sick about this, but gave him another chance, and he slaved, and slaved, and slaved, for he said, 'If I fail this time, I know I'm done!' But I cheered him up, and said, 'The third time is the

charm.' Well, I'm blessed if he did not get 'spun' again in military law—full marks in French—and he was right about his uncle, who always said he was lazy and slack—so Jack never came back for his third try."

"No? I say, what a beastly shame!"

"Then Stopford, who lives near Rotherham, heard that there had been the devil's own row about something—something that was hushed up, but whatever it was, Jack got the boot, and was fired off abroad, with the traditional flea in his ear."

"I know Rotherham," said Mr. Pascoe, "he is a pragmatical old ass—he is in my governor's club—he has an awful temper, and the son has a face like a muffin, and the figure of a chimpanzee in consumption."

"Oh, yes, and by the way, I forgot the girl," continued Captain Breakspeare, "she was a good bit older than us, rather pretty and purring, with a slight cast in one of her eyes—a sort of half-hearted wink."

"Perhaps it was a love affair with her?" lazily suggested Pascoe.

"No fear! Well, Stopford wrote to Jack—so did I—so did Beaufort—all our letters came back through the post with 'Not known at this address.'"

"By George!" ejaculated his visitor.

"I'm sure of Jack—I know him, child and boy—always straight and honourable, and ready to back his friends."

"Possibly he is backing a friend now!" said the other.

"Not he—he has been let in! Yes, he is like his father, only not half so clever, who often got let in. Jack always believed in people—and was stuck—but whatever happened, he, so to speak, paid up, kept his word, and held his tongue."

"From what you say of this fellow, he is not fit to be at large—he ought to have a keeper."

"Well, he was always a bit of a knight-errant, we called him the knight—he used to rescue drowning cats, and pick up old women, and once he thrashed a man for ill-treating a horse—he got fined for that. Is it not strange, that after writing and asking, and wondering, for years, I should fall over Jack to-day, coming out of the telegraph office? He pretended not to know me at first. Whatever *did* happen, he is terribly sore about it—I can see."

"By George, I would be sore if I were a railway guard in India. Bad enough to frizzle on the line for a day or two—think of it by the year! Why doesn't he try for some other billet?"

"Billets are not flying about out here, or likely to strike a man who has no interest, no money, no training—nothing but his two bare hands. Clean hands, I'll swear. He must find it a shocking change, brought up as a rich man's only son, with guns and hunters, and always such a popular chap."

"Of course, as long as he had the guns and hunters!" grunted Mr. Pascoe. "I wonder if he is popular here? where he has nothing to show but a green flag."

"I daresay he is. Fancy his being in this ghastly hole, or up and down this line, several solid years."

"I should not fancy it at all—I'd shoot myself. Though I was born out here, I loathe the gaudy East, where a fellow can't have his shirts properly glazed, or get on the telephone—no club—no theatres. I say, are you going to take this chap up?" and Mr. Pascoe slowly turned a penetrating eye upon his comrade in the long chair.

"I would, like a shot, if he was on, but he won't be taken up. It's hard to think, that here's my old pal, who was the fellow with all the coin and generosity——"

"Come—they don't always pair off."

"—Now just a railway servant, who calls me 'sir,' and has a hand as hard as a brick."

"At least it's clean!"

"Oh, shut up—and brags of earning one hundred and fifty a month."

"Well, I go one better—what's my splendid pay, eh? Two hundred and fifty-four rupees and horse allowance."

"He won't take a lift—if I know him—he will plod on here—and how is it going to end?"

"There I think I can help you," said Pascoe: "if he is steady, he will be promoted, and bloom out into a burly station-master! If not—he will go under. I've heard my father on the subject. Go under like lots of our country-folk out here, where it's so easy to be lost—you know what I mean—lost in the bazaars, where food is cheap, disguise is easy—then one day a little extra opium, and it's all over!"

"That will never be Jack's line."

"What is his line?—I mean when he's off the line—what is he like?"

"Just what I've told you—a straight chap—not clever, but with heaps of horse sense, fond of sport, a nailing rider—and—er—yes—though he is a bit thin and weatherbeaten, and older than his age—distinctly good-looking."

"Oh—so he is good-looking, is he? That's all right, then a woman will get hold of him, if she hasn't got hold of him already. He is bound to marry some distractingly pretty half-caste, who will develop in time a charcoal complexion, and a figure like a tent. Meanwhile, she'll drag him at her heels for all he's worth."

"Not she! He is not impressionable—he never cared for girls."

"You *wait*," said Pascoe, with a look of indulgent contempt, "I've a good deal of second-hand experience. My father and grandfather held commands out here. And——"

"Beg pardon, sir," interrupted a gruff voice outside the tent, "can I speak to you for a moment?"

"All right, sergeant, come in," replied Captain Breakspeare.

"It's your young horse, sir," said the man, saluting; "the farrier says he is not fit to travel—he's off his feed, and got a lot of fever about him."

"Off his feed and fever," repeated Mr. Pascoe; "too much ship, too much train. I said it was a risky business bringing a thoroughbred out to race."

"He doesn't take to gram, or the climate, poor brute. All right, sergeant, I'll come round and have a look at him," and Captain Breakspeare rose to his feet and reached for his helmet."

"Of course I'll have to leave him behind," he said to his comrade, who still retained a recumbent attitude. "However, it's a great piece of luck for me that I came across Talbot—he will see after him."

"Well, Tony, I'm fairly comfortable here, and thank goodness I've no stable responsibilities—hand me one or two of your Russian cigarettes, and on, Breakespeare, on! The horse may be at his last kick!"

During the sweltering heat of midday Tani-Kul was steeped in repose; troops, natives, animals were all asleep, and the only sound which broke the drowsy silence, was a kite screaming through the air, or a sullen goods rolling through the station. With the first little breeze, there came a responsive movement, soldiers began to move, to talk, and by degrees the camp was astir and under weigh. The men fell in and marched to the station, where water-carriers and

fruit-sellers briskly plied their trades. Captain Breakspeare sought out Mr. Sharratt, the station-master, a portly, grey-bearded man, who had once been a sergeant of Horse Artillery.

"I just wanted to say a word about my horse," said the officer. "I'm leaving him behind with a syce—only for a few days—till he is a bit acclimatized."

"All right, sir."

"Don't let the chap give him any beastly native drugs, and no heel ropes; he is a nervous brute, and a week's rest will do him good. I've left orders for running up a chupper shed."

"Certainly, sir—I'll see to that myself."

"I need not trouble you, thanks. I've a note here for a man I know—a guard—I am asking him to have an eye on the horse—he knows all about them."

"Oh, indeed, sir." The station-master's tone expressed surprise.

"Yes," replied Captain Breakspeare, who was about to hand a note; then he seemed to remember something, and suddenly scratched out the name, and wrote Vernon. He appeared particularly anxious to efface what he had written—but the pencil was blunt.

"Vernon," said the station-master, examining the address; "he is on duty just now, sir. I'll see after the horse for you—I used to know a good deal about them, for I was in the Service, the A.I. Chestnut Battery."

"Indeed, were you? Don't trouble, thank you—Vernon will see to him all right. You must find this a dull billet, after horse artillery?"

"Well, sir, I've lived here eight years now, and it's a sort of second nature, though I won't deny the hot weather is a bit trying, and there are no hills handy, but we have a fine settlement, and a chaplain comes every three weeks. We get all our things from the

Co-op. in Madras—free—by rail. The Company do their best, and give us good quarters and good pay."

"Are there many of you?"

"About two hundred, besides families: guards, drivers, firemen, traffic and telegraph staff, shed men, signallers, switch-men—so you see we are a pretty big crowd."

"Who looks after them?"

"The subordinate staff is controlled by the traffic inspector, the gazetted ranks are different."

"Yes, and how is—er—Vernon—getting on?"

"All right, sir, steady—wonderfully smart and dependable, and gives no help to the fine fund," and he laughed, a sharp laugh like a bark. "Of course he is not exactly in our line—I know a gentleman when I see him—but we have a good few, one way and another, of the same class. It's strange how folks drift to the railway—anyhow it's English run—and shabby folks with nice voices and manners look us up. But no man is taken in without a first-class reference, or who is over thirty years of age. Oh, we are *very* particular about character."

"Of course you must be—it's a business that offers so many opportunities for a fatal mistake."

"Aye, that it does, and thank God we don't have many."

"Accidents, you mean?"

"No—we have no severe gradients, it's the rivers that are our trouble—they seem to rise like magic—and we have slips, and loose boulders, and wash-outs. We would have had a very nasty business with the Pennair river, near Ramgurter, a year ago, only Vernon and another guard had their eyes open—especially Vernon, he has a cool head; they both got a rise."

"I hope Vernon will get lots more," said his friend.

"It's all in his own hands, sir, entirely in his own

hands—but I feel sure he will be promoted. There is an idea now of making gentlemen start like him, but with better pay—right at the beginning as under-guards, station-masters, and inspectors, till they rise to be traffic managers. I should not be surprised if you were to see Vernon a traffic manager yet; and all along of his own merit. I suppose——" suddenly lowering his voice to a confidential key, "he—got into some little trouble at home?"

The wild shriek of an engine drowned the last of the sentence, which the officer affected not to have caught.

"All right then," he said briskly, "you'll give him the note, won't you? Please keep an eye on him, and shove him along," he added, as he hurried away.

At last the crowded train, full of khaki and helmets, had stretched itself with loud clankings of coupling chains, and slowly lumbered out of the station, leaving a platform strewn with banana peel and cigarette ends. When the bustle had subsided, and the up Bombay passenger had left, the station-master went home to his comfortable quarters and his supper; naturally he informed Mrs. Sharratt of his long talk with the Lancer Captain, and exhibited the note with which he was entrusted.

"Ah!" she said, examining it carefully, "there, his real name is crossed out. I always knew there was something odd about that Vernon. I have no confidence in these half-gentlemen."

Mrs. Sharratt did not like Vernon, chiefly because he fought under the banner of Madame Tanzy.

"What is it, mother?" inquired Jessie; "what have you got there—a chit? Why don't you open it?"

"Because it's not for me," she answered tartly; "an officer gave it to your father for Vernon."

"An officer—yes—that one he had such a long talk with in the waiting-room. Oh my, now, I wonder

what's it all about? Do let me have a look at the envelope."

"I can't make much of it, nor will you, missy," pushing it across the table, "for all your sharp eyes. It was addressed to his real name you see—and then scratched out!"

"His real name," repeated Jessie, seizing the note, 'how romantic! I thought his real name was Vernon—perhaps he is a lord in disguise."

"A lord in fiddlesticks. How you do go on!"

"I know one thing, mother," studying the inscription as she spoke, "it ends in a T."

"What's the good of that?" demanded her mother impatiently, "our name ends in T too. Oh, that young man will keep his secret—*he* knows how to hold his tongue. I always thought there was something dark about him—some trouble—I only hope he did not bring a forged reference!"

"Now, mother, you know that would be impossible, and you would really like him very well—if he was not such a pal of Madame Tanzy's."

"Jessie! How dare you say such things, miss. My word, if I were to have talked up to *my* mother the way you do, she'd have boxed my ears, and sent me to bed."

"Oh, those are old days," rejoined Jessie, totally unabashed; "how glad I am I did not live in them."

"After all," resumed Mrs. Sharratt, "if Vernon is a gentleman, of course he has done something—some crime, no doubt."

"Now, mother, you've been reading a sixpenny shocker."

"Else," raising her voice, "why hide his real name? Why come on the railway at thirty-five rupees? Why stay three years?" and she paused for a reply.

"Well, at any rate, he is very steady now," declared

his champion, "never touches spirits, always attends church. You've never heard any tales about him here; even Mrs. Cardozo allows he's respectable; and he mixes with the other guards just like themselves, and goes shooting, and plays cricket, and sings at the concerts—he can do things—and is not a bit like the Tanjore loafer, who bragged of his racehorses, and his four-in-hand, and had D.T.—or the sailor who had run away from his ship—or——"

"This man has run away from something," interrupted Mrs. Sharratt passionately, "that's as sure as my name is Sarah Sharratt."

"Well, he will never run away from Tani-Kul, mother, you may make your mind easy about *that*—he will stick here like a postage stamp, and marry Rosita—it's my opinion that he is desperately in love with her."

"Trash! Everyone is in love with Rosita! It's catching like a fever; but if it comes to Vernon, he is in love with Mrs. Holland—our *lady*. He often goes over there to tea, he escorts her to church—when Holland is on duty! All I hope is that we don't have a nasty scandal! I think Vernon——"

"You are talking of Vernon, are you, Sally?" said Sharratt, coming in from the verandah; "he's a sensible chap, as steady as Old Time, whoever he may be, and most trustworthy and hard-working, whether a man's eye is on him, or not; always ready to lend a hand. I've seen him in the goods shed, loading away in his shirt sleeves as if he enjoyed the job! Well—if you and Jessie are going to this ball—time's up—and you had better look sharp and get ready."

This was the evening of the monthly assembly held at the Institute, which represented, so to speak, the heart of the settlement; a lofty, brick-built building, with salmon-coloured walls, and a chunam floor—

cool, and easy to keep clean, but not sympathetic for waltzers. Every event of note took place within the Institute, from christenings to theatricals. The community were fond of dancing; which offered an outlet for the young people's spirits and activity, and a healthy mode of exercise for their elders.

On the occasion of one of these functions the decorations and arrangements were entirely in the hands of Madame Tanzy, who worked marvels with a few yards of red saloo, some paper palms, and a dozen Chinese lanterns. The band was supplied by local talent (each performer receiving a couple of rupees and unlimited refreshments). The dance was timed for half-past seven. Railway station folk are obliged to rise early —for that matter everyone is early in India. By eight o'clock the room was full, and the state quadrille, opened by the deputy traffic superintendent and Mrs. Sharratt, was already a triumph of the past. Here were numbers of gay young people, all bent on enjoyment; the men in white drill and blue silk cummerbunds (the station colours), the girls in their smartest toilettes. Oh, what ironing and tacking, and curling and plaiting, had gone to produce such remarkable results! After all, youth has but one time, and this company were amusing themselves as thoroughly as their contemporaries in any part of the Empire!

Around the walls, a certain number of the older men lounged, for the most part talking shop—it had been a busy day—and they discussed the latest railway gazette, promotion, the troops, and troop trains.

"So you had a friend among the officers, Vernon?" said the station-master to the guard, who had just entered; "he left a bit of a chit for you—it's about his horse. It looks," he added, as he held it out, "as if he had forgotten your name, for he had to write it twice."

"Oh, thank you, sir, that's all right," muttered Vernon, as he hastily thrust the note into his pocket, whilst his eyes eagerly searched the room in quest of his partner Rosita.

"These Lancers are the first lot of this season's reliefs," continued a man who had been speaking. "Now we shall have a good few, there are drafts coming up from Bangalore on Monday."

"How I wish you could get some of the officers for our dances," said Madame Tanzy, suddenly joining the group, "they would give such go and *éclat*."

"I don't know what our railway volunteers would say to that, madame," replied Sharratt; "and it seems to me," glancing round the hall, filled with eager and animated faces, "that we are very happy as we are!"

CHAPTER V

THE eyes which sought Rosita, speedily discerned her, for she blazed like a sun among minor constellations, and at the moment, stood apart from other girls, surrounded by a crowd of clamouring partners.

The radiating centre of attraction wore a white gown, a gold necklace, and waved with inimitable grace a splendid red feather fan; she looked charming; alive to the finger tips; her air, the poise of her supple figure, and her toilette were altogether different from the rest of the company. She practically enjoyed a monopoly of admiration, and in her presence, contemporaries seemed faded and eclipsed. Rosita would have shone in any ball-room; not alone for her beauty, but for her almost startling individuality, and the irresistible magnetism of her glance.

At the moment, a soft rose tinted her cheeks, her

dark eyes sparkled between their sweeping lashes, she gesticulated with her tiny hands and fan, as she distributed smiles, jests, and deadly wounds among the circle of her courtiers.

The assembled company looked on indifferently—they were now so well accustomed to Rosita's predominance; but one or two whispered and wondered, "Where she had got the fine swami necklet?"

Naturally each adorer secretly accused a rival of the gift—one entered it to the credit of Vernon, another to Booth his comrade, some to Pereira in the telegraph, or it might be the same individual who had presented the bangles last Christmas? No one would ever know; Mademoiselle Fontaine, for all her chatter, could be reserved. Even her aunt, who was *au courant* with most secrets, was not in her confidence; indeed this bold and clever woman was a little afraid of her charge. To be the nearest relative to an acclaimed beauty, was undoubtedly a weapon in her hand, but the glittering blade was too sharp to tamper with. When she asked Rosita serious questions—questions that required a serious reply—the girl merely laughed in her face.

Ah, she resembled her dead mother, Marcelline; such a coquette, so self-willed, and so strong. What could a poor woman do, with one who would not speak, who would not quarrel—who would only laugh?

At Tani-Kul it was not considered fashionable, or even decorous, to wear *décolleté* dresses; ladies who did so made themselves conspicuous, and as open to remark as those reckless ones who sat out in the verandah, promenaded in the Compound, or even ascended to "eat the air" on the flat roof. There was Mrs. Beard, wife of an engine-driver, always over-dressed—everyone was staring at her low bodice of green satin, gorgeous with beetles' wings—she had a snow-white neck, boldly

displayed—but a pair of long suède gloves discreetly covered her ugly red hands and arms. Most of the women, wore V-shaped bodices, elaborate blouses, and one or two (greatly daring) had ventured in what they called "tea-gowns," a combination of opera-cloak and dressing-gown, always so agreeable and sympathetic to a stout, or skinny figure. As the band began to play the prelude to a waltz, men streamed in through the doorways, and sauntered round in search of their partners. Vernon made a direct line for Rosita, and her court, which broke up as he advanced with a little gesture of appropriation.

"*Enfin vous voilà!*" she exclaimed, "and how late! Till you came, I could arrange nothing," and she waved her fan to indicate her many claimants.

"If I were my own master, Miss Rosita, I would have had a Special, and been here long before the doors were opened—but——"

"But," she interrupted, "we will lose no more time. See," and she extended a dainty gold-shod foot, "one waltz for this—" then putting out its fellow, "and one for this!"

Mademoiselle Fontaine gazed at her feet in complacent admiration, and the eyes of every man in her orbit were also fastened on the fairy slippers. Suddenly raising her head, she announced:

"Mr. Vernon brought these for me, otherwise they would not have come to-night, therefore I promised him two waltzes, and you are all so cross. But if the shoes had not come, I had not come—and, as you see, they are very pretty!"

"And a very pretty price," supplemented a girl who had joined them. "Why, Rosita, they must have cost twenty rupees, if they cost a pice," and Irene confronted her friend with an expression of round-eyed horror.

"They are a present from *ma très chère* Madame Panache, at Pondicherry—so there!" and she tapped her with her fan. "Come—let us not talk of money, but dance, Mr. Vernon," and she held out her hand, "here is 'Le Valse Bleu'—*commençons!*" and to the envy of her abandoned adorers, in another second, Rosita—circulating eddies of patchouli—was swimming round the room in the arms of Vernon. The guard danced extremely well—his lessons had begun before he left off pinafores—as for his partner, she moved with all the grace and verve of her great-grandfather's nation enhanced by an air of Eastern languor. Beneath her white skirts, could now be seen glimpses and flashes of the shining shoes, the price of Vernon's happiness! Such shoes had never been beheld in Tani-Kul, that evoked a mixture of passionate envy, and admiration, in the bosoms of those who were shod in mere black kid—"chukler," manufacture bought in the Bazaar.

After many turns, Rosita came to an abrupt halt a little out of breath. As she leant against the wall, fanning herself with deliberate grace, she said:

"And so, Mr. Vernon, you have a friend in the Lancers?"

"How did you know?" he asked.

"*Mais, mon Dieu!* is not everything known in Tani-Kul? *C'est à dire,*" and she corrected herself with a smile, "*almost* everything! Coquellino de Castro and Lina Carvalho saw you in the refreshment-room, talking, talking, talking—*et encore* talking—so you need not pretend—need you?"

"No, Miss Rosita, I will not pretend—I never do that."

"Oh, fie!" raising the fan, "how can you say so! You pretend here to be a guard, and you know you are really—" she paused, and her glance was both inquisitive and penetrating—"something different."

"Pretend to be a guard! I don't understand; if I were only pretending, as you call it, I'd precious soon get the boot. I've been hard at work, pretending, the last twelve hours!"

"Bah! I cannot explain very well, but you know what I mean. You are *gentilhomme*—same as your friend the officer—you come out here till something—oh, some little *bêtise*, blow over, and one day again you will be rich, and a seigneur—*n'est-ce pas?* Come now," and she raised her dazzling eyes to his, "you will confess to little Rosita, will you not? *Voyons! Racontez toujours!*"

"Really, Miss Rosita——" he paused embarrassed.

"You will be awfulee rich some day?" she resumed, "and go away from Tani-Kul—it will come in a blue letter—as it does in stories. Then you will go and never think of us more—you will forget even *me*," and she looked straight into his eyes.

"I shall never be rich: as far as I know, my life will be here—I will never go away—and never"—with sudden energy—"forget—you."

"But really," with a confidential gesture, "tell me truly, truly—*parole d'honneur*—will you not have a great fortune one day?"

"*Parole d'honneur*—no, not a rupee."

"But," and she drew a long breath, "you have had one, because you are so particular, so extravagant in little things. Oh, yes, I guess it."

"Please—do not guess about me."

"But I must, I must, I must," she repeated with dancing eyes.

"I assure you it is a waste of time—I am only just one of yourselves."

"But I am not 'one of yourselves,'" she retorted, drawing herself up, "I have the blood of the *noblesse* here," and she touched her heart. "*I* am of the race

of the De Lignes—my ancestor was a Duc. I feel it all burning in me—pride of race!"

Rosita thus lightly ignored illegitimacy and her native strain, and added as she looked at her partner with bright, dilated eyes, "I feel so different to all these people—I will be grand—I will be talked about—I know it. You are different too, and so we are in sympathy. Ah, there is the last of the Valse Bleu! —I am so sorry—we made so little of it, and wasted time." A pause. "*Voyons!* I am waiting for you to make me a compliment, and to say—that time passed with Mademoiselle Rosita is—never wasted!"

"I never pay those sort of compliments," he answered in a low, hoarse voice, "and my heart is only too full of words I would say to Mademoiselle Rosita—but dare not."

"Bah!" with a little shrug, "now you become serious! And so I send you away," and she waved him a playful dismissal.

So! The story about Vernon, springing from a note and an interview, meant nothing, and she had his word of honour that he would always be a poor man! *Alors, c'était fini!*

The band was playing a romping polka, and everyone was dancing eagerly; stout, elderly women were careering round with callow boys, and portly officials with girls in pig-tails. One, however, sat apart; Mrs. Holland did not dance; but not to appear at the Institute would have but added to her character of being "stuck-up." She was an almost solitary wall-flower. There was, of course, old Mrs. Jopp, who weighed nineteen stone, and Miss Mills, the schoolmistress, who was lame, and Mrs. Evans, who was delicate; but there was absolutely *no* excuse for Mrs. Holland, who was neither old, fat, nor lame—no, in the opinion of the community, she was "too grand."

Nevertheless, she did not present an appearance to corroborate the term. A slim woman of thirty-five, dressed in a plain white cambric, she sat in a corner with her delicate hands crossed in her lap, and her brown eyes gravely fixed upon the revolving, stamping crowd. Mary Holland was the daughter of a poor man of good family; she had left home to earn her bread, and after going through the usual hospital training, had come to India, where some years of hard work had broken her health. In a little hospital, in a hill station, she made the acquaintance of Holland on leave, a respectable, well-to-do mechanic of the yeoman class. As "Sister Mary" he had worshipped her from afar: circumstance favoured him; ultimately they had been married very quietly in Bombay, and Holland had applied to be transferred to other quarters, where there would be no "talk"; for although gentlemen were not uncommon among railway folk, the *lady* wife of a locomotive foreman was distinctly rare!

Tani-Kul had called on and entertained the bride; the bride had punctiliously returned the visits, and entertained Tani-Kul; but somehow the acquaintance languished. Mrs. Holland did not belong to any faction—she had no intimates, even among the "locomotives." Her manners were guarded, she kept outside the stream of gossip, and was absolutely indifferent with regard to various stories that ran serially in the settlement. She had lived at Tani-Kul for several years, and the utmost subtlety of investigation led to no disclosures; there was not a whisper against the lady wife of Tom Holland. Her house, and everything connected with it, was in spotless order, her dress and appearance simple but exquisitely neat—in short, as her neighbours declared, she was "just like a nurse," as stiff and as prim and as silent as if she was still Sister Mary on night duty.

Mrs. Holland had no children, but in cases of children's ailments, and indeed in all illness, her assistance proved invaluable; but once the invalids were convalescent, their interest for her seemed to evaporate and she faded out of their lives. She and Tom Holland, a burly man of forty-five, appeared to suit one another admirably, although they had not much in common beyond a love of children and animals, and a hatred of fuss. She was fond of reading, played strange, unfamiliar tunes on her piano, and excelled in exquisite needlework. In public, Holland treated his wife with profound respect, invariably deferring to her wishes and opinions, and there was no reason to suppose that his manner was otherwise when at home, in the neatest bungalow in all Tani-Kul.

His wife had introduced several strange fashions—for example, afternoon tea, instead of being a hearty square meal, supplemented by roast duck, or curried prawns, was merely served on a small tray with an embroidered cloth, and consisted of tea and thin bread and butter. She had abolished the usual round table from the middle of the sitting-room, and actually brought in *plants!* set her face stonily against bead mats, bead screens, and little fans nailed upon the wall; also she cultivated a garden, and raised English seeds with enviable success; and never went down to gape at passing trains—no, not even troop trains!—and therefore her neighbours began to fear that it was not the correct thing! In short, little as she suspected it, she was a leader of fashion, and in any social crisis people would look at one another and wonder "What Mrs. Holland would say or do?"

During the last few months, a certain amount of talk had begun to circulate with respect to the lady herself; although she had no intimate women friends—and kept all men at arm's length with a sort of

firm hospital " you must take it at once " manner. This woman, so cold, remote, and difficult of access, had developed a surprising taste for the society of young Vernon! Of course she was a good ten years his senior, and the debated question was, what did he see in her? To complicate the puzzle, he was uncommonly friendly with Tom Holland; they went snipe and teal shooting together on off days—and he sometimes had supper with them on Sundays. It was admitted—even by Madame Tanzy—that there was no harm in all this, but why did he go to tea with Mrs. Holland? She was not young, pretty, or even amusing. Did she lend him money—or what? They exchanged books and papers, played tennis, and when the railway chaplain held Divine Service, frequently sat side by side, and had been seen to sing out of the same hymn-book!

It would be idle to deny that there was a considerable amount of speculation respecting the quiet, self-possessed matron, sitting so demurely in the corner.

To tell the truth, and the simple, harmless truth, she and young Vernon were mutually attracted; both had strayed out of their orbit, like two lost stars, and were practically revolving in another constellation. They had become acquainted by the bedside of Booth, Vernon's mate at the Coffeys' house. Booth had crushed his foot badly, and Mrs. Holland's dexterous fingers daily dressed his wound; on these occasions, she and Vernon had exchanged a few sentences, and she had invited him to call on her—hence the friendship—and scandal. To Mary Holland, it was as iced water in a thirsty land to talk over home and home interests, events and memories, with an educated English gentleman. He was of her world, of her class, akin to her in many ways. Vernon was delighted to find himself in such congenial atmosphere—there was a feeling of rest and sympathy in Mrs. Holland's society,

yet with all their arguments, discussions, and confidences, the pair never touched upon personal matters, or the closed book of their own lives.

Vernon gathered that the past of this worn-looking and cultivated woman had been sad, and possibly stormy—but that now, she was happily moored in this quiet backwater for the remainder of her existence. For her part, her woman's instinct, had helped her to the conclusion that this young man had once been surrounded by wealth and refinement; a half word—hastily recalled—a little slip of the tongue, unintentionally betrayed him. His reticence, his modesty appealed to her, and she was conscious of a kind of maternal instinct, and exercised all her charms and fascination in order to what she mentally called "keep him straight."

Sunday walks, talks, and tea, had brought the pair together, and Mrs. Holland readily discovered that Vernon was a son who still felt the influence of a good mother; that to him, her memory was sacred. Gambling and drinking offered this young fellow no temptations. A love affair was what his friend dreaded! She could not endure the thought that he, who was only six-and-twenty, might marry and cast in his lot for life with Tani-Kul! And oh, what snares lay about his feet! Within a stone's throw, were many really attractive girls, any one of whom would gladly become the wife of the smart young Englishman. For instance, Jessie Sharratt, clever, and rather pretty; she had an instinctive feeling that Jessie liked Vernon; but Jessie's father would look much higher than a mere guard. There remained Beatrice Lumley, Irene Pereira—above all Rosita—the dazzling, and bewitching! Mrs. Holland's influence, militant, and protective, was especially directed against Rosita; Rosita was complacently aware of the fact, and chiefly, indeed

solely, for this reason encouraged Vernon! In her heart of hearts she preferred Booth to any of her admirers; Booth, tall, fair and debonair, with curling chestnut hair, and bold blue eyes, was country born, the orphan of a sergeant in a cavalry regiment. He had been educated at the Lawrence Asylum, Ootacamund, and had passed from there into the railway. He would not be a good match, he was too careless and reckless, had been in one or two scrapes, was head over ears in debt, and head over ears in love with Rosita.

That notable favourite, the Circassian Circle, had been performed with extraordinary vigour and precision; even Mrs. Sharratt surged to and fro with the ardour of a school-girl; each cavalier, when it came to an end, bowed himself before his partner, conducted her to a seat, and went his indifferent way. For there was no sitting out at Tani-Kul, no kala juggas, and but little promenading. When the band ceased, the room represented a parterre of wallflowers—they covered the benches, and were of all shades and ages, wearing for the most part familiar toilettes. As for the men, they gathered in doorways and discussed shop, politics, promotion, rolling stock, or went forth to smoke in the verandah.

Vernon was about to deposit Madame Tanzy beside an important ally, but the lady preferred to move slowly round the circle, precisely like some great hostess —with a word here about cucumbers, a whisper there respecting a new pattern, or a hint to a friend, that the services of Mrs. Pereira's Dirzee were to be had for three days, in exchange for a saddle of mutton.

Madame took a special pride in the fact that she rarely appeared in the same evening gown! She was resourceful as well as thrifty, and had a marvellous knack of presenting an ancient black lace garment under different aliases. Sometimes it was embellished

with jet, sometimes with gold or silver, pink, blue or amber—to-night it was arranged with scarlet, and a jaunty little top-knot danced in her fuzzy hair, whilst Mrs. Sharratt, benched among satellites, in a plain high "tussore," followed the little flitting figure, with swelling indignation and a pair of angry eyes. Oh, what impudent assurance! Oh, what brazen pretensions!

Vernon, who had nothing to hope for but his second waltz with Rosita (the last dance), moved over to Mrs. Holland's corner, and took a seat beside her. He looked remarkably smart and well groomed in his snowy suit, glossy shirt front, and broad blue cummerbund.

"So you have had a busy day at the station," she remarked.

"Well, I've been out on duty most of the time—however, I saw the regiment, and I came across an old friend."

"I am glad of that," she answered, "and what did he say to you?"

"By Jove, that reminds me—I've a note from him in my pocket—he gave it to Mr. Sharratt. If you'll excuse me, I'll look at it now."

Captain Breakspeare wrote a large and legible hand (six lines to the page), and as her companion turned it, Mrs. Holland was almost hit in the eye by the words, "My dear Talbot." So that was his real name—not Vernon—and why Vernon? and she gazed reflectively at the preoccupied profile beside her. It was a handsome profile, and an honest face!—the lips were firm, and undoubtedly expressed secrecy and self-control.

"He wants me to see after a horse that has been left behind sick," said Vernon, crumpling up the note. "I am to keep him here, and exercise him, till he's fit—

a young thoroughbred Breakspeare is bringing out to race, and run as second charger. It will be rather fun exercising him—only this beastly cotton soil is so full of holes."

"Yes," she agreed, "though looking at these miles and miles of empty plains, one feels that one could gallop for ever."

"Empty plains indeed," he repeated; "sometimes when the natives get off at little stations, I wonder where they are bound for? They go away in crowds, making straight for the horizon, just as if they were walking into space."

"And what had your friend to say to you?" she asked; "may I hear?"

He nodded reluctantly.

"Oh, he gave me a lot of advice—he is a real good sort. He wants me to chuck this—of course that's all nonsense, he doesn't know what he is talking about. Every man feels where his own shoe pinches."

"But you will go home some day," declared Mrs. Holland, in her clear, incisive voice. Yes, he would certainly escape from this monotonous, and sun-baked existence, and *she* would be left. A sudden stream of flooding memories seemed to dim her hazel eyes. "Certainly you will go home, and be happy, and live and die in England—unless—" and she paused and glanced at him significantly, then at Rosita, who had floated by—"you marry."

"Well, perhaps I shall," he answered steadily. "I am acclimatized—I am getting on in my work and years—I shall be twenty-seven next July. Why should I not make the best of things, and take the goods the gods provide?" and he looked at her boldly—he, too, was thinking of Rosita.

"It depends entirely upon what you call goods, and gods," rejoined Mrs. Holland, who had become

rather pale; "oh, I hope and pray, you may make no mistake."

"I say, do just look at Mrs. Duke," he exclaimed inconsequently, "wife of a driver, dancing with Jones, an under-guard." (The wives of engine drivers are far above guards in the social scale.) "What is Tani-Kul coming to?"

"Jones is ambitious," admitted Mrs. Holland, with a smile; "it is a fine trait. I do not agree with Cardinal Wolsey—even I have aspirations."

He turned and looked at her interrogatively.

"Oh, so very small, and humble, compared to those I cherished in my youth. Then, I wanted—never mind what—now, I'd be contented with a cottage in the Neilgherries, covered with roses, and huge bushes of heliotrope in the garden—a view of the far plains. Think of the cool, delicious air, the running streams, think of never again hearing the station gurrah, or the shriek of an engine! Now for your ambition."

"Oh, my ambition," with an embarrassed laugh, "I've never analyzed it—but, I think, to keep my head up—and in time, to get a good billet on the line."

"And," returning to her subject, "take a wife! I do hope you will be fortunate"—there was a look of timid admonition in her eye—"and make a wise choice. Yes, some day you will marry, and leave hateful Tani-Kul. Marriage is——" she hesitated.

"Marriage is just a dip in a lucky-bag!" he added briskly, "and I, for my part, like Tani-Kul."

Mrs. Holland smiled; her smile was a mixture of bitterness and tenderness as she said:

"I don't quite understand; and yet I do. No doubt you like Tani-Kul—because—it is the home of—the girl you love?"

Vernon nodded a shamefaced assent, and coloured

up to his hair, as his honest eyes met the anxious gaze of his questioner, then suddenly springing to his feet he exclaimed :

" Here is the last waltz, and I am engaged for it. I'll come round in a day or two, if I may, and fetch you to see a real English-born horse—I know you love horses. *Au revoir.*"

Thus Mrs. Holland and Vernon separated ; she, to make her way homewards, escorted by her burly husband, listening abstractedly to his monotone respecting the two splendid new locomotives which were coming down from Bombay. Vernon, to search for his partner—but vain was his quest. Rosita was on the roof, " sitting out " the dance in the brilliant moonlight, whilst Booth, her companion, murmured vows, protestations, arguments and prayers, appropriate to the hour and scene !

CHAPTER VI

ROSITA'S deserted partner had no immediate opportunity of lodging a complaint with that faithless damsel, for a few days after the dance, she departed to Madras in order to visit two school-fellows who were patronizing a well-known boarding house in Vepery, from whence they had despatched a tempting invitation.

Rosita was the last girl in Tani-Kul to refuse an alluring summons, which promised two balls (one of these a railway dance), a concert, and fireworks at the Luz ; and turning a deaf ear to her aunt's shrill remonstrances, she made vigorous preparations for her journey. A free pass was readily obtained, Jessie

Sharratt had lent a yellow tin trunk, Alida de Castro a smart blue dust cloak, Uncle Joe, ever her slave, had made (secretly) a donation of money, and Mademoiselle Fontaine took her triumphant departure in charge of Mullins, a hoary-headed guard, sped by crowds of sympathetic friends—most of whom were well pleased that Madras City should have an opportunity of realizing what Tani-Kul could produce in the shape of good looks!

Madame Tanzy attended her niece to the station. Here indeed was a woman who understood the delicate art of putting a good face on domestic defeats, and never published her failures. For by no means the first time had she striven with Rosita, who had, as usual, emerged from the struggle radiant and victorious. After all, it was difficult to cope with a pretty girl, who, armed with a cool head, a sharp tongue, and an invincible will, used her beauty as a weapon to advance her schemes. The train that bore away the beaming and bowing traveller undoubtedly carried off a considerable amount of the spice and interest circulating in the settlement. Who was there left to quarrel over? To take the lead in exciting activities and dance and song? To startle the community with daring toilettes, and reckless speeches—to drive half of the young men to their wits' end!

Indeed, since the enchantress and her spells had withdrawn, several little humdrum love affairs had ventured to reappear: Janie Allen and Robinson of the telegraph renewed an incipient tenderness which had somewhat languished, and Vicars the engine-driver—a notable match—and Annie Wilson of the signalling had arrived at a long protracted understanding—their engagement was given out at the gardens and publicly announced at last! In short, as Mrs. Sharratt triumphantly declared, "The mice

were having a fine play, whilst the cat was away, amusing herself in Georgetown and the Luz."

When Vernon was off duty he devoted most of his time to looking after, and exercising, the sick thoroughbred. The animal had not taken kindly to the East and its customs; fought furiously against heel ropes, entirely failed to understand the Hindustani tongue, and loathed the mollishing and blandishments of his turbaned syce. The invalid was now sufficiently convalescent to be ridden forth at times, when the duties of a running guard permitted, and introduced to such sights as bullocks, camels, dark people, and the shrieks and thunder of railway traffic; the novelty of his surroundings embodied many terrors to the English stranger, and being a nervous animal, he made not a few "scenes," but his rider managed him admirably, and spectators declared, that Vernon in the saddle, was the right man in the right place.

One cool, grey afternoon, Mr. and Mrs. Holland, accompanied by the station-master, came to inspect the new importation. His temporary abode, a chupper shed, was situated within easy distance of the Coffey house; and Fontenoy, the son of Musketeer, with the blood of Ormonde in his veins, looked sleek, graceful and aristocratic, when led forth to confront his visitors.

"He is a perfect gentleman!" announced Vernon when the horse-cloth emblazoned with "A. B." had been stripped from the thoroughbred's shining flanks, "and is delighted to see and hear you, for he loves the sound of an English voice, don't you, old boy?"

To which Fontenoy responded with a vicious squeal and kick, intended for a passing buffalo.

"Not much the matter with *him*," remarked Holland; "soon fit to box, eh, Vernon?"

"Yes, he is all right now—nearly fit. I take him out when I can for a good long spin. What do you

think of him ?" to Sharratt, "isn't he a well-shaped one ?"

"Aye," agreed the station-master, gripping his beard in one hand, "I believe he will win races ; but racing is not what it was when I was a youngster—I remember the days of Desert-born."

"Shure, and wasn't *he* an Arab ?" put in Coffey, who had all an Irishman's interest in horses and sport. "I'll lay me head, that this English-born fellow here would show him his heels. He's a great plan of a four-year-old—he has a pair of quarters on him that would lift him over a house."

"And what is your opinion, Mrs. Holland ?" asked Vernon, turning to her.

"I think he is a beauty," she answered, coming forward to stroke Fontenoy's velvety nose with a slim, bare hand. "Poor fellow—transported for life ! Never again will he see the fair green fields of England !"

"However, he will see English oats," supplemented her husband, "and he will like them as well, if not better."

"No, I'm sure he will regret the fields," she continued. "I think one of the most pitiful sights I ever saw, was when driving near a railway line in the country, two open trucks behind an engine, were filled with broken-down horses bound for the Rotterdam butchers, taking their last journey. Among ponies and carters, I noticed some well-shaped old skeletons, worn by the London streets, who had probably been fliers in the shires. Every head was turned so wistfully towards the fair green meadows, which possibly they had not seen for years. I assure you the sight brought a big lump to my throat—it haunts me still."

"Wife, you are too tender-hearted over dumb creatures," remonstrated Holland in his gruff voice.

"Tender-hearted yourself, Tom. Who sat up two nights with a sick dog?"

"He is just a little too long in the back to please me," remarked the station-master, returning to the prosperous and handsome Fontenoy.

"But he hasn't an ounce on him that hasn't a right to be there," declared Coffey. "D'ye see his fine straight set of legs, with lots of bone, and his big flat knees, and all his bellows room?"

"I see, Coffey, that you know a lot about horses," said Sharratt, with a laugh.

"Not more or as much as yerself, sir," was the diplomatic reply, "but as a boy, I was in a racing stable near the Curragh, and was, I may say, reared on horses till I went and took the widow's shilling, all along of a girl in Harristown."

"Mrs. Coffey should hear this!" said Holland with a comfortable laugh.

"Augh, 'twas long years afore I ever laid an eye on Katty. All the same, I still know a good horse when I see him."

"Yes, he is a real nice fellow, isn't he?" said Vernon.

"He is so," assented Coffey with emphasis. "And if I wor you, I'd *keep* him sick, till the end of the cold weather."

"I'm afraid I could not manage that," said the guard, who was busily engaged in saddling the animal. "He goes up to Bangalore next week."

"Just give him a turn round," urged Sharratt as Vernon mounted. "I declare it's a real pleasure to see him moving. If I were not a fourteen stone man, I'd like to throw a leg across him myself."

That Vernon was an accomplished horseman was evident to all as he exhibited the paces of Fontenoy, and cantered him along a strip of sun-dried grass. It

was odd to see a young fellow in guard's uniform and belt, managing a fiery young thoroughbred with such consummate address and ease, and it occurred to the four spectators that Vernon's mysterious change of circumstances had something to do with horses and racing! Yes, undoubtedly horses were his weak point, and he had come to grief on the Turf.

Fontenoy's box had been bespoken—he was to take his departure in a day or two—and one afternoon Vernon, who was off duty, indulged himself in a long last ride. He had ranged far from the settlement in search of a suitable locality for a stretching gallop. He knew the country well, thanks to repeated shooting trips, and he and Fontenoy had mutually enjoyed a really good spin. It was a cool evening in December, tender shoots of green were beginning to show themselves above the black soil, but save an occasional boulder of trap-rock and a few stunted bushes, there was little to be seen except a magnificent cold-weather sunset.

Vernon had long since ceased to admire these flaming farewells to the day: the colour, the languor, and the richness of the East, did not appeal to him; and at the present moment he was absorbed in mental pictures as he paced slowly homewards along the sandy road, and the thoroughbred, with loosened rein, sniffed at a little evening breeze which gently swayed the white-headed cotton plants.

The light fresh breeze, the sensation of being once more in the saddle, and a rousing gallop, had stirred Vernon's blood and turned his thoughts from their everyday channel in a dusty station and a guard's brake van, to his old home. How often in childhood had he scoured the green springy turf, with the meadow-scented west wind beating on his face! What a contrast between then, and now!

As a rule Vernon was not given to brooding over the past, or to analyzing his moods and emotions. His motto was "Full steam ahead," and he sternly drove memories away; in fact, he was a philosopher in a guard's uniform, and realized that certain reflections had the effect of making him hard, discontented, embittered, and injured no one but himself.

But to-day memories proved too strong for him. Figuratively they stormed the citadel with shouts, crowded into his brain, and held the stronghold. They showed him his father, active, cheery, handsome, open-handed, keen about politics and sport; his mother, ever busy with her garden, her books, and the poor. How well he remembered her dark-grey, black-lashed eyes, and the great tears that dimmed them when first he went to school. The joys, the ecstatic surprises of his holidays, his pride in his first hunter, his first gun; how interested they had been in his feats at footer and cricket, and how he must have bored them with his long-winded school yarns. Then came that fatal winter, bringing with it two deaths within six weeks, and the subsequent wiping out of his old home, old servants, old horses, old dogs, even his mother's canaries, were dispersed. When, a slim boy of fifteen in deep mourning, he was brought from the manor to the castle, he felt as if he had exchanged some gay and sunny garden for a gloomy family vault; but he kept his misery to himself, and was considered stolid and unfeeling; yet many a night in that frigid guest-chamber, he had cried himself to sleep with heart-breaking sobs of "Oh, mother, mother, mother!"

Lord Rotherham, narrow-minded, dyspeptic and autocratic, was famed for the longest upper lip in the Upper House, and one of the finest collections of coloured prints in England. He had succeeded to the gleanings of his ancestors; prints, ivories, and

rare *objets d'art*, and Vernon, who was interested in uncommon articles, and had never heard the command, "Don't touch!" freely examined these, with reckless and profane fingers. Looking back across the years he now could see himself as he appeared to his uncle—who had received his brother's penniless orphan as a duty—a noisy, self-confident lad, who had been spoiled at home.

His aunt, a faded lady of fashion, enjoyed patent medicines, and collected thimbles, but had no other object in life. She lacked a moral backbone, and lived in mortal terror of her consort, and her cook. Peregrine, her son, was a round-shouldered youth, who wore spectacles and goloshes, actually loved Greek, and had nothing in common with his cousin save a taste for strawberry jam. Linda, five years their senior, was a pretty, fair girl, with forget-me-not eyes, a slight droop in one eyelid, quantities of fluffy hair and a wheedling smile.

Vernon and Linda foregathered agreeably; she was by no means so self-centred as her relatives, and evinced a healthy interest in other people. Linda hunted with the local pack, and this established a bond between her and her cousin. In the holidays Vernon escorted his pretty relative, but she rode so badly that he was positively ashamed to be seen in her company; she funked the easiest fences, and was a sure warrant to give a sore back. Jogging along from cover to cover with an eligible cavalier at her bridle, embodied her idea of the chase! However, thanks to Linda, he had enjoyed some capital runs, and when she was lazy, or from home, he was permitted to exercise her hunters. It was to Linda that he showed the best side of his character; sincerity, generosity, gratitude and loyalty; and in return, she made him the reluctant repository of many secrets, both amorous and financial.

As for Vernon's Irish relations, he wondered if they wondered what had become of him? Lord Rotherham detested the family, and absolutely forbade any correspondence. It was his opinion that from this "Hibernian horde" the boy inherited his taste for horse-flesh and low company. With respect to the latter, Vernon's father had allowed him to go into the stables, in fact they went together; and as a small boy at Whitegates, he had often played cricket with the gardeners' and grooms' children. Here at the castle, old Carson, the head coachman, remembered Colonel Talbot as a lad, and gave his son horses to exercise, yes—and cigarettes to smoke. When this latter enormity was discovered Carson nearly lost both place, and character.

During his holidays, people in the neighbourhood offered the boy mounts, and asked him to shoots, but Lord Rotherham did not smile on these invitations. He declared that such pleasures would give the young fellow an appetite for tastes which he could *never* gratify. He was destined for the Indian Army—if he could pass the examination. If! There was the rub! Vernon worked hard, for if his uncle yearned to be rid of him, he was even more anxious to be rid of his uncle; a commission in the Army would be the key to freedom. With such a prize dangling before his eyes, he toiled and plodded with commendable industry. Unfortunately he had no taste for mathematics, his papers on tactics were farcical. Twice he was "spun," the third and last chance lay before him, and this time, he was straining every nerve to succeed; if he failed, beyond his uncle's scorn and displeasure, what were his prospects? His too partial parents had believed him to be bright and intelligent; in reality, he assured himself, he was densely stupid, a born duffer. He could drill well, shoot straight, and was

a bold horseman, but what was the good of all that? when he could not remember the extent of the lines of Ciudad Rodrigo, or the outlines of Napoleon's Campaign in Poland and lots of other things? French he had mastered—chiefly thanks to his French nurse; with French and topography he might pull through, but military law was his despair.

In spite of his tutor's excellent reports as to character, Lord Rotherham treated his nephew as if he were in disgrace. Without doubt he offered a sad contrast to Peregrine, who could pass his examinations with ease (he was intended to grace the Diplomatic Service), but then Peregrine would not get on a horse's back to save his life, and had screamed like a girl when he pinched his fingers in a door.

For some mysterious reason, Vernon had acquired a local reputation for loafing and idleness; his uncle's prejudices, like those of other influential folk, had filtered through to the neighbours, and left a certain amount of deposit—Lord Rotherham treated his nephew with an air of frigid forbearance, and as if he had been guilty of some secret crime known only to themselves. At last a real crime was committed—though not by him. Never could he forget Lord Rotherham's white rage, his stuttering, jerky speech, his raving denunciation. Passing through a black storm of domestic thunder and lightning, nearly stunned with astonishment, and agony, when he came to himself, Vernon found that he had been turned out of the castle, and out of England, and was on the high seas, with twenty-five pounds in his pocket with which to make a start in life. Career, connection, comrades, good name, all had been swept, so to speak, off the board. Fortune did nothing by halves, where he was concerned.

At times his twenty-one years of home life, seemed

remote and dim, a vision, a mirage that was gradually fading ; this idea was supported by the fact, that between England and himself not one link remained. The weekly mail brought him no letters, but this apparent neglect was his own fault. When, covered with shame and disgrace, he was cast forth from the family nest, where not one voice had been raised in his behalf, he was far too proud—yes, and stubborn—to attempt to bring himself before the notice of his old friends. A certain lie had obtained a great start, it was not worth while now to endeavour to overtake it.

"It is best so," he said to himself, with bitterness ; "I am, as a dead man, out of mind—and who cares ? India is my home ; here I will live and die. What do I owe to name or family ? I am my own ancestor. I must strive to hold up my head, be independent, and make the best of things."

The best of things ! What would he deem the best of things ? Instantly the dazzling vision of Rosita rose upon his mental vision ; almost unconsciously he had worshipped her for two years. Vernon was a young man of slow but strong feelings, feelings which he carefully concealed ; nevertheless many a discerning eye in Tani-Kul could see that he was under Rosita's paw. The girl was undeniably lovely, her beauty was glorious. She had a delicious voice, which had been admirably trained by the French nuns—had her face not been her fortune, she might have found it in her throat ! She sang (preferably in French) the most touching, thrilling, emotional little chansons, the words of which were lost on most of her audience, but the dramatic delivery remained. Vernon alone understood the fiery, poignant words—he had scored full marks in French. If Rosita had been well taught in music, and her voice carefully produced, dancing had come to her by nature. Light as a leaf, graceful and sinuous

as her native ancestress, she naturally fell into the most enchanting poses, and improvised measures that were a delight to the eye.

"Yes," meditated the young man, "Rosita was adorable. Perhaps she was not exactly the sort of wife that his father and mother would have selected for him; yet his parents, who were ever such enthusiastic admirers of beauty—so generous and liberal-minded—must have admired Rosita. It was true that a querulous little imp in his breast, whose remarks could not be stifled, muttered that Rosita Fontaine was a coquette, that she was ill educated, given to patchouli, pearl powder, and peppermint, that her manners left something to be desired; but Love, the all-powerful, choked down and strangled the base traitor. Had she not beauty, youth, charm, and every other splendid gift? Did not everyone adore her? Yes, to Vernon's imagination Rosita Fontaine represented the best thing life could offer, and he would marry her to-morrow, if she would accept him. Why should he not have some gleam of happiness? Why stand by and see his best years wasted?

"Even if he had been brought up in another station, all that was behind him. At present Rosita was socially his superior; the niece of a leading fitter is a far more important personage than a mere head guard. Still he might rise——"

Here these agreeable reflections were suddenly interrupted by a prolonged and isolated scream, shrill and piercing. The nervous, and doubtless superstitious thoroughbred, came to an abrupt halt, and began to tremble violently. There it was again! Like the agonized cry of some lost soul. Vernon turned in the saddle and scanned the horizon. No living thing was in sight, and yet that cry had undoubtedly issued from some human throat.

CHAPTER VII

THE cry was repeated; now hoarse and despairing, it came from the left, and seemed to utter articulate syllables, which shaped themselves into:

"Hi! Hi! Hi! Help! Help! Help!"

Vernon instantly put his horse into a gallop, and made for the direction of the shouts, calling out, as he tore along, "Hold on! Hold on! All right! I'm coming!"

Some fellow countryman was undoubtedly in mortal peril, but how? Was it a hyena? a snake? and he had no weapon but a thin Annamullay cane.

In less than a minute he was astonished to find himself almost on the brink of a wide piece of water—a large tank, partly covered with weeds and pink lotus plants—in the thick of which he descried the splashing, struggling figure of a native, who screamed:

"The weeds have got me! They are dragging me down!"

Vernon immediately recalled some tragic tales of these great lonely tanks, into which, if any one fell, the chances of his being rescued alive were twenty to one. More than once, he and Holland had come across them when shooting teal and wild duck, and Holland had sacrificed part of his bag, sooner than attempt to retrieve birds from these treacherous depths. Beneath the innocent lotus lily, lay a particular species of deadly weed, which, once set in motion by any falling body, swayed to and fro, and gradually and inflexibly encircled it with murderous green tentacles.

This cruel, floating snare had been the cause of the death of many unsuspicious folk who had come to bathe, or rashly adventured the recovery of lost game. It gripped its victim like some living, crawling thing, clung fast to the limbs of the swimmer, and when he was rendered powerless, slowly drew him to the oozy green depths, above which the pretty pink lotus flowers flaunted so serenely.

The native who spoke such pure English was undoubtedly at his last gasp, when Vernon flung himself off his horse and called out:

"Hold on a moment and it will be all right!"

Nevertheless, he found himself in something of a dilemma; if he were to let the horse go, he might never see Breakspeare's precious three-year-old again; on the other hand, a man's life was at stake, and surely of more value than the prospects of a promising thoroughbred. Vernon was capable of rapid thought and prompt action in an emergency—a guard has need to have his wits about him; he hastily took off his belt and hobbled Fontenoy, then his quick, clever fingers unwound his own putties, and knotted them together, and throwing this extemporized rope into the water, in a short time a gasping, spluttering and entirely exhausted figure, was drawn to the edge of the tank and so saved.

The man, half drowned, cast himself face downwards in an utter abandonment of relief, and there he lay prone, shuddering and moaning; but at last he raised his dripping form, and looked up at the guard; Vernon drew back with an exclamation of astonishment—this miserable, gibbering creature, was Gojar, the night watchman!

"Great Christmas!" he ejaculated. "What the dickens does it mean? Why, you are English!"

"I am," admitted Gojar, rising to his feet, straighten-

ing his thin figure, and speaking with an effort, "and you have saved my life—two minutes more—and I was gone."

"Yes, it was a bit of luck for you my riding in this direction, and it was just a toss up, when I started. I can't think what put it into my head to turn west—but that I did, was, as I've said, a precious good job for you. And so, Gojar, you are no native—why this get up?"

"I am English born—the disguise—er—suits me—but when a man is at the point of death—he uses his mother tongue. You have my secret, Mr. Vernon, keep it—or else I'll drown myself; no"—and he shivered—"but another death instead—and they say drowning is painless—my God!"

"Oh, I'll keep your secret all right," agreed Vernon, who was busily engaged in soothing the affronted and affrighted Fontenoy; "I suppose you saw all your life over again—as they say?"

"No, I was spared that, but I was fighting those devils of green weeds that were twining and twisting round my body like so many live serpents. My life isn't worth much to me, as you may suppose—still, I did not want to go out like that, and be swallowed up quick, like Korah, Dathan, and Abiram."

"Well, I must be shoving on," said Vernon; the purple twilight was descending, night-birds were stirring, a bat fluttered by. "I don't want to lose my way, and ride into one of these death-traps."

"I know every inch of the plains," said Gojar as he wrung the water out of his dripping clothes. "I'll go along with you—here, I'll hold your stirrup and keep you straight. Butherum! Butherum! Go slowly—slowly."

"Yes, of course, I'll slow down; you must be a good bit knocked out of time, eh?"

"I'm all right now," he answered; and although it was so dark that Vernon could scarcely distinguish his features, he was aware that Gojar had hastily swallowed some restorative concealed in his turban, for his voice had become full, and decided.

"If you feel bad," continued Vernon, "you can get up for a bit and I'll walk—the horse is quiet enough now."

"No, no," protested Gojar, "though once upon a time I hated a quiet horse. Well, I'll never get on the back of one again."

Vernon made no remark, and for some time he and his queer companion proceeded in silence, only broken by the creaking saddle, and the regular beat of hoofs on the sandy cart track.

"Oh, those weeds!" exclaimed Gojar suddenly. "I shall dream of them till I die. Well, Vernon Sahib, you have done me a good turn—and one day I hope I may be able to repay you."

"Bosh," rejoined Vernon, with an Englishman's horror of thanks, "it was all in the day's work. I am glad I was on the spot; but I say—look here," and he suddenly dismounted and walked beside him, "I can't imagine why you lead such a beastly strange life, aloof from your own countrymen. Of course, I know that it's none of my business! But to see an Englishman—an educated chap, too, I'll swear—to see you masquerading as a native, makes me feel bad."

"Yes, I can understand that; I'm an abhorrent spectacle. Once upon a time, I'd have felt bad myself! I'm an imitation sort of native—I am glad you did not say nigger. Lots of the natives are splendid chaps—I know them well. As for my life—it is, I admit, strange, and also beastly, and yet I am not the only fellow in Tani-Kul who leads a curious life—you

are not leading the life you were born to—come now ? "

As Vernon made no answer, he resumed :

" And my life has some compensations ; what has yours ? "

" Compensations ? " repeated the young man.

" Yes ; half my time is spent in a sort of heaven. Yours, I should say, was all in the other place."

" I know your heaven—Ganja ! " said Vernon with scorn. " Ganja—you will kill yourself ; mind and body."

" No doubt I shall ; or rather Ganja will kill me," he acquiesced with staggering composure.

" Can't you pull yourself together, and shake it off ? "

" No, I cannot—no more than I could shake off those slimy, damnable weeds without your help ; they held me in the grip of death."

" Perhaps I could give you a hand with the Ganja, too ? " suggested his companion.

" No, that is beyond your power, my good boy."

Was he dreaming, or was Gojar, the night watchman, addressing him, a head guard, as " his good boy."

" I am obliged to you for your kind intentions," continued Gojar, " but if I were to leave off Ganja, I should die in a week. My weakness harms no one ; it is even a question if it harms *me*," and in a sonorous voice he half repeated, half chanted :

" Why be this juice the growth of God, who dare,
Blaspheme the twisted tendril as a snare,
A Blessing we should use it, should we not ?
And if a curse, why then—who set it there ? "

" Oh, I say, come," protested Vernon, " that's old

Omar—awful rot. Simpson is always spouting about the Potter, and the Vine! I think the old Persian is responsible for a lot of drunkenness; however, he never wrote a word about Ganja, did he?"

"The grape was his Ganja, and some day it will have its singer."

Vernon stared at his companion! The night was now clear, a week-old moon rode in the heavens and illumined and idealized the arid plains and Gojar.

Gojar carried his head high, his face looked as dignified and impassive as that of a bronze cast. The poor chap was undoubtedly as mad as a hatter, and this would account for everything—the queer life, the disguise, and the Ganja!

"I hate to think of you working as a native, whoever you are," he blurted out impulsively; "let me try and give you a lift. I'll come and look you up. Where do you live?"

"In a native quarter, with an old woman who cooks for me, mends for me, and lies for me."

He spoke with the well-bred voice of an English gentleman; an English gentleman, who lived in Tani-Kul Bazaar! The fact filled Vernon with a sense of horror, pity, and shame. As they approached the settlement, Gojar resumed:

"No, don't come to look me up. But some night you might drop in to the goods shed; I'm always on duty after nine o'clock. I'd like to have a 'bukh,' and I may be of service to you."

"All right," said Vernon, "I'll give you a call with pleasure."

"You and I have come down in the world," continued the watchman; "you—young as you are—kept the straight road, and never brought disgrace on the grand old name of Gentleman, and I suppose something—perhaps the voices of dead ancestors—repays

you for long hours, rough words, rough work, and rough food. As for me :

> " I drowned my glory in a shallow cup,
> And sold my reputation for a song ! "

And with an abrupt gesture of his hand, Gojar disappeared within the mysterious shadow of the adjacent Bazaar.

CHAPTER VIII

As Vernon rode slowly towards the chupper stable his mind was concentrated on his recent adventure, and the amazing discovery that Gojar, the night watchman, was an English gentleman, masquerading as a native, quoting Omar Khayyám—and absolutely daft ! His thoughts for the moment were miles away from Rosita, and yet here was Rosita actually coming towards him ! Rosita in the moonlight, wearing a maddeningly becoming hat, and a soft tulle ruffle, was too enchanting for words. She had but returned that afternoon, laden with spoil in the shape of gifts and hearts—her purse was low, but her pride was high ! The enchantress had matched herself against certain notabilities in Vepery, had carried off their admirers, wrought much havoc, and had been flattered and petted and called " The Rose of Tani-Kul." Nothing less than a scarcity of rupees had prevented the Rose from indulging her adorers with weeks of her society; it was, however, whispered that the boarding-house lady had been exceedingly eager to speed the parting guest, who had turned her establishment topsy-turvy, and made some of her most lucrative bachelors, enemies for life. How could enemies remain under the same

roof, sit at the same table, and share the same office gharry? Some were bound to leave. The girl must go—yes, otherwise the pretty little flirt from Tani-Kul Junction would soon ruin the business.

Rosita had therefore departed, with vague but profuse promises of "writing"—promises given, needless to say, in private—and here she came hurrying over to exhibit herself and her new toilette to Alida and Coquellino de Castro, and to unburden her mind of some of her triumphs. She had never seen Vernon on Fontenoy, and as she first cast her eyes upon the approaching cavalier was at a loss to recognize him. Who could it be? What a splendid horse, and what a dashing rider! Ah, here was something very, very different, from the weedy young clerks in Vepery—possibly an officer or some great swell—but when the horseman came a little nearer—oh, what a sell! why, it was only Vernon!

Yes, but as Rosita surveyed the horse and man, she realized that this was not Vernon the guard—but a Vernon who might be anybody, who, whatever he might declare, *was* somebody! Perhaps—perhaps—her little scheming brain instantly began to evolve new plans.

"So you see I am back," accosting him, and suddenly recalling his mind from his late adventure.

"So you are," he stammered, "a—a—thousand welcomes!"

"Oh, my! what a beautiful horse!" she exclaimed. "Where did you get him?"

"He is not mine—I only wish he were."

"But why not yours, Mr. Vernon?"

"Because the only horse I shall ever own, will be a clothes-horse! Guards don't usually keep English thoroughbreds, do they?"

"An English thoroughbred! Will he bite?"

"No, you may stroke him."

Rosita adventured a timid hand, and patted Fontenoy's hard neck. Her hand was infantile in size, but not pretty; to be candid, it was rather claw-like, with ugly pointed nails, and if Rosita was of noble race, the race had withheld their sign manual.

Vernon was about to dismount, but the lady protested with an insistent gesture.

"No, no, no! I will not have it; you do look so nice up there! *Très, très, très beau!*" and she glanced at him with flattering and daring eyes. Oh, it was the face of an enchantress.

"I have not seen you since the ball, Miss Rosita," he said. "You were a defaulter, you know; you did me out of the last waltz, and you still have not paid me for one shoe."

"'Oh, dem golden slippers!'" she quoted with a laugh. "I was tired, and went home, I think—but I've been to so many dances; they are all mixed in my head."

"And your partners?" dismounting as he spoke.

"Yes, they are mixed too! See now, I am honourable, *n'est-ce pas?* Do not be cross with me and I will pay you with good interest—truly I will."

"What is your idea of good interest?"

"*Attendez*," and she came to a standstill. "In Madras they say, 'Oh, Mademoiselle Fontaine, you must have your portrait taken—*il le faut!*'"

"And no doubt you consented?"

"Yes, it is——" a pause, and she threw up her hands. "Well, at least it—is Rosita."

"I am glad of that, but it would have been odd if it had been anyone else!"

"Now for your little debt—and because of our friendship——"

"Don't call it friendship, Rosita," he urged.

She waved away his protest with an airy gesture.

"I will give you one copy for yourself—to keep."

"Oh, you are——" he burst out; then, "but only to me—to no other fellow?"

"How can you be so jealous?" and she looked up at him with a mischievous smile, "so silly? Well, yes, one copy for Mr. Vernon alone—if he is good—*c'est entendu.*"

"Why can't you call me Jack? And when am I to have this photo?"

"In two or three days, when it comes from Madras. Yes, I had a reeping time there."

"A reaping time, yes. I suppose you devastated the whole place?"

"Devastate—I do not understand—tell me, I have been away a fortnight—did you ever miss little Rosita?"

"Need you ask? It seems fourteen centuries since I saw you."

"Well, I am glad to be back!" she announced with a stifled sigh.

"That is good news," said Vernon eagerly; "no place like home, eh?" Then with a sudden change in his voice, "Rosita, you know that no matter how you come and go, and carry on, with other fellows——"

Here she gesticulated, and attempted to interrupt.

"*I* am always the same, always at your beck and call; don't you think it is time to be serious? I stand well with Sharratt; he will recommend me for promotion. I have saved over a thousand rupees, I am sure I shall be promoted. Of course, I know I'm not half good enough for you, but I will do everything—anything—to make you happy."

Here he came to a full stop; he was generally inarticulate under the stress of strong emotion.

Rosita turned and looked up at him, her face broke

into a smile; she liked to realize her power, to see this strong young fellow, usually so self-possessed, silent and trembling before her.

In the moonlight she considered his thin clear-cut features, his deep-set, dark eyes, firm mouth; his face looked drawn and white. Yes, he was really far handsomer than Charlie Booth; he had such fine hair, and a beautiful profile—on horseback she would have taken him for a lord or a cavalry officer—and no doubt he would get on; he would make her a real lady—but—but—there was something in his character, sternly antagonistic to her own. He was strait-laced, narrow, English—a humdrum life would be hers—no late suppers, *risqué* little songs, and masked dances, *ever*.

"May I—may I—speak to Sharratt?" he stammered.

She hesitated for a second, then said:

"Yes—yes—if you like—but not yet."

Then with sudden animation:

"*Tiens! voilà la petite Coquellino qui court!*" and without further farewell Rosita darted away to meet her dearest friend, and cast herself into her outstretched arms.

* * * * * *

It was during the hour of siesta, two days later, that Mademoiselle Fontaine held her first reception. Her return to Madame Tanzy's showy bungalow had undoubtedly quickened the pulse of society; not a few men and girls were again the prey of hopes and fears—hope, the portion of the swains; fear, the share of various agitated spinsters. It was a well-worn saying, that Rosita could twist any man in the settlement round her finger—yes, not even excluding Mr. Sharratt, or the chaplain himself.

The afternoon was warm, and Rosita lay luxuriously extended on a cane couch—shoeless and gownless;

her neat feet and legs, encased in red silk hose, were crossed in true Crusader fashion, her thick wavy hair was coiled loosely on the top of her head, which rested on her bare arms. Rosita was supremely at her ease in the midst of her little court. The court sat on chairs, on the bed, and even on the floor, whilst their voluble sovereign poured forth the long tale of her surpassing conquests.

Here were Jessie Sharratt, Alida and Coquellino de Castro, Elizabeth Jacks, Irene Pereira, and Annie Wilson—the betrothed of Vicars—and her sisters, Fanny and Susan. To these favoured ones, the glories of Rosita's purchases were presently revealed.

"I have brought back three hats, a parasol, a lace scarf, a length of rose-coloured gauze, and two pieces of muslin, a fashion-book, ribbons, gloves, and lots of sweets. The gloves and sweets were presents *naturellement*," explained Rosita, and she rose lazily, and began to exhibit her treasures. The hats were passed round, cautiously tried on, praised and criticized; the materials were delicately pinched up, fingered, and their prices guessed at—by command. Finally the boxes of chocolates were put into circulation, and the company settled down comfortably to discuss Rosita's campaign.

"Last of all, here is my *bonne bouche*," she said, drawing out a photograph and holding it over her head. "They forced me to sit for it—Alexis—Lopez—and Dicky Jones—they quarrelled about it later, as to who should pay—*et le voici!*" and she tendered with a dramatic air, a half-length portrait representing her head and bare shoulders rising from clouds of white tulle: one tiny hand clasping the ever-victorious red fan. Rosita looked supremely beautiful, bewitching, and—well—the other adjective was perhaps a little difficult to find.

As the work of art was passed from one to another,

many were the ejaculations, varying from, "My!" "Oh, well, I never!" to "Oh, my, how lovelee!"

"And I am going to have such fun with it, too," declared the complacent proprietor.

"I've no doubt of that," assented Jessie sharply; "you will give it to Kelly, and Booth, and Smith, and Jacks, and Pereira"—here she paused for breath, "and let them *all* fight for it—oh, I know you!"

Rosita made no attempt to combat this indictment, she merely clasped her hands behind her head, looked up at the ceiling-cloth, and laughed. She was secretly possessed by the instincts of the savage woman, or wild animal, who takes a fierce delight in seeing the other sex contending for her favours, yes, even to the death. Rosita enjoyed nothing so much, as to behold two men scowling at one another, for the sake of a smile from herself, and it was her constant practice to pit her lovers against one another.

"*Voyons!* I am going to let you all into a great joke," she announced graciously.

"Oh, I know your joke," broke in Lizzie Jacks. "Tim told me."

"Tim! *C'est un animal! Je serai*——"

"Come, come; none of your French here, Rosita!" interrupted Jessie impatiently. "When you want to put off an answer, or befool a man, out comes the French! But we know you can speak English as well as I can, and Tamil better than a Tannyketch."

"Yes; tell us in plain words the story of your giving your photograph as a prize in a tennis tournament," urged Lizzie. "I did not believe it—but is it true?"

"Quite true," replied Rosita, extending a languid hand for a fan. "I am giving one copy framed as a prize; it will be played for to-morrow at the weekly Gymkhana. There are six entries, and whoever wins—claims Rosita!"

"That is to say, her photograph," amended Jessie; "goodness knows who will get the original."

"There is to be no talk," resumed Rosita; "no one is to be in the secret, except the players—and us. I thought it would amuse you all," glancing round, "to know on the sly, that they are *not* playing for the six-rupee sweepstake this time, but"—and she threw her head back, and fanned herself slowly—"for *me!*"

"If it gets out there will be an awful row," remarked Annie Wilson after a somewhat awed silence.

"There is bound to be a row anyway," added Jessie; "when it is over, they will all quarrel. What put it into your head, Rosita?"

"Mr. Vernon."

"Mr. Vernon!" echoed several voices, and the tone was incredulous.

"Yes; now listen all," commanded the beauty with an imperious wave of her fan. "The evening I came home, I met Mr. Vernon riding near the Gardens. He was so cross with me, and said I had never kept my promise about the shoes. Well, I do not like people to think I am not honourable—I am—most honourable—*noblesse oblige*—so I say, 'Very well; I pay—and I give you my photograph.'"

Here Rosita paused dramatically; there was not a sound; every eye was riveted on her face, everyone asked herself the question, Was Rosita going to take Vernon after all?

"I thought I was doing what was best and proper, but then came Jacks, and Booth, and Pereira, and Simpson—all so angry—so to make peace I say, "All right, I give one only—one for *all*. I make no promise—I give a prize, and Saturday you can play! Who wins the singles—wins the single photograph of Rosita Fontaine!'"

Then suddenly sitting erect, and gesticulating with a rounded arm, she continued:

"And all agree—all but Vernon! Oh, he was mad! Never—*never*—did I suppose he could look and speak like that. Ah, it is these quiet fellows who have the deep emotions. Oh, he made me such a scene!" The recollection of which was so pre-eminently amusing, that Rosita burst into a peal of laughter. "No, he would not listen to my reasons, he would not even let me speak, but after a while he became calm. He said, to offer my picture as a prize to be fought for by six men was unbecoming, undignified, unwomanly—*tiens, ces grands mots!* He said there would be talk and scandal. I tell him that I adore *both*, and I say, 'You are so delicate-minded you need not play,' and he said, 'No—not for a lakh!' And he goes away. Next day I meet him and try to coax and be friends. No, *il n'en veut pas! Alors c'est dommage.* He takes everything *au grand serieux*, though he is young. So then, how to make up my six? Jones is on duty, Gregory is at Perambore—six I must have, and, Annie, I have asked your *fiancé*, Mr. Vicars, to make up the number. Now there is a man of sense! I write a little chit, and he answer, I come with *great* pleasure.'"

This announcement was received in absolute silence, no gleam of pleasure was reflected on the face of Vicars' *fiancée*, but two unbecoming red streaks stained her pallid face, as she and her sister Susan exchanged uneasy glances.

"Now tell me some of your news," said Rosita, who had the native passion for gossip; it could never be too sensational, malicious, or highly spiced, to satisfy her appetite. "What have you all been doing whilst I was away?"

"Nothing very exciting has happened," replied

Jessie; "we have no splendid adventures to match yours. I believe the Commander-in-Chief and Staff passed through one night, the new engines are expected on Monday, and Mrs. Bing's parrot has laid an egg."

"But you overlooked Annie's engagement," remonstrated Susan Wilson with an injured air, and turning to Rosita she added, "Only think, she is getting her trousseau from Whiteaway & Laidlaw."

"When *I* am married, *my* trousseau will come from Paris!" declared Rosita with superb conviction. "As for Mr. Vicars and Annie, that is such an old story—and I am asking for *des nouvelles*."

"Well, there has been no end of a row in the Mutton Club," said Elizabeth Jacks. "It is between Miss Mills and Mrs. Bains. By some mistake Mrs. Bains got Miss Mills's saddle out of her turn, and gave a dinner and ate it, and Mrs. Bains wrote such a furious unchristian letter, that Miss Mills is going to show it to the chaplain, when he comes next week."

"Bah! Fancy fighting over *mutton! quelle idée!*" exclaimed Rosita with a shudder of disgust.

"Ah, yes; you would rather people fought over *you*. Well, who knows but they will. Cheer up, Rosita," said Susan Wilson, rising from the floor, "I daresay we may have a couple of duels after your tennis match, perhaps even a murder and suicide. There are lots of nice remote places down the line," and then with briet nods, and distinctly cavalier farewells, the sisters Wilson took their departure, followed by all the visitors, but Jessie Sharratt and Coquellino de Castro.

"Go, go, *ma chérie!*" urged Rosita, addressing the latter, "I know Jessie is waiting to scold me. Come back in half an hour; I want you to run up my new muslin, and I will give you my old white hat." With a warm embrace Coquellino (a nickname bestowed by her patroness) departed.

"Now," said Rosita, suddenly rising and beginning to search for her shoes and hairpins, "what is it?"

"It is to implore you to be careful, Rosita. You have, by your own account—and I fully believe it—raised a storm in the Madras boarding-house; be wise, and do not do the same thing here. You have as many lovers as knots in a kite's tail. They say that at least half a dozen young men carry engagement-rings in their pockets. *Do* marry one of them and put the others out of their misery."

"But I am enchanted to see them miserable—that is my only pleasure!" declared Rosita as she flung a gay skirt over her head.

"I believe you are. You are like Helen in Tennyson's 'Dream of Fair Women'—'where'er you come you bring calamity.' There will be trouble if you go on as you do; a trouble you will leave to others to bear, if I know Rosita Fontaine. Even father noticed that Kelly and Jacks never speak, and certainly Simpson, who used to be such a steady fellow, has taken to drink, and they say Jeff has enlisted."

"How can I help that? How can I help being pretty?" demanded Rosita, confronting her mentor in one of her new hats. "You preach, preach, preach always. If you were *me*—suppose it—what would you do?"

"I would marry Vernon," was the prompt reply. "He is——"

"Oh, he!" interrupted Rosita. "Well, why not marry him?" And she turned to Jessie with a gesture of outspread palms. "See! I give him to you—a handsome present!"

"Rosita," colouring angrily, "how can you say such odious things? Mr. Vernon never casts *me* a thought; he cares only for you," and her voice shook a little. "Yes, you are so lovely—it is no wonder. Oh, Rosita,

you are such a lucky girl—and yet you throw away all your good gifts, and waste people's lives. I believe Mr. Vernon would make you so happy."

"Yes, but I prefer Booth, or even Pereira. Vernon is too serious; I know that in his heart he disapproves of things—jokes—at which others laugh. If he were rich, or even a somebody, I might say 'Yes.' Once there was an idea that he was a gentleman of fortune—*un gentilhomme, oui, mais je ne vois pas la fortune!*"

"Well, remember that you will not always be young and pretty, and able to pick and choose."

"I am only eighteen; I will go away some day from this inferno, and be celebrated, talked of, fêted and adored—oh, I feel it in my heart!" laying her tiny hand upon it.

"Heart!" echoed Jessie; "*your* heart! Why you haven't a scrap; it is a lump of brass reflecting Rosita. As to going away and becoming celebrated, aye! I am not so sure of that! You are not clever or book learned, and you cannot do a simple sum—you cannot spell."

"That is true, but I am extremely clever in other ways, *ma chère.* I am not cut out for a *dame de bureau,* or even a *modiste*—I can sing and dance."

"Oh, Rosita, would you go on the stage!" gasped Jessie, whose ideas were inherited from her Presbyterian ancestry.

"*Mais certainement,* if I get the chance, in Europe, in Paris—oh, imagine it! The triumph, the clapping, the flowers, the jewels!—and think of a three-roomed quarter, as wife of one of the railway men; yes, I shut my eyes and I can see it all—the red saloo curtains, bed chicks, white walls, a brick floor! No more dancing, no more lovers, no more presents—and perhaps a baby! Ugh! how I should hate it!"

"The baby?"

"Yes, certainly; why, of course."

Jessie, who loved children, cast up her eyes and hands; then she said:

"Well, I see I am only wasting my breath, there is nothing whatever to be done with you."

"No, so my aunt says. *Je suis impayable!*"

"Before I go, Rosita, I must warn you that Pilchai Moothoo Pillay, the hawker, has been round again, asking most particularly for you. He told me privately, that you owe him—oh, such a bill! and he cannot wait. He says it comes to three hundred rupees—but that is incredible. I do not believe him."

"*Naturellement*—of course not!" said Rosita coolly. "I shall pay him off and give him his *congé;* never will I deal with Pilchai Moothoo again—*c'est un ingrat.*"

"Then you *do* owe him money, Rosita? Oh, if I were to owe money I should never close an eye! I could not sleep."

"Oh, nonsense, *ma chérie,* to owe is no crime! If one committed murder—or perhaps a little *vol*—one might have dreams; but money—what is it? Nothing!" and she snapped her fingers with ineffable scorn. "Now my toilette is made let us go out to the Institute. I must show the world my new hat. Listen—it cost fifteen rupees—and is not paid for. Nevertheless—to-night—I shall *sleep!*" and Rosita opened the door, and sailed forth.

CHAPTER IX

THE return of Rosita had undoubtedly made a ripple on the surface of society, and on the occasion of the tennis match, despite of supposed secrecy, there had been whispers, and an unusual number of young people,

and their elders, were spectators of the ordinary Saturday sweepstake. Tani-Kul boasted of some capital players, and had wrested the Main Line championship, from Perambore, Jolapett, and Raichore.

To-day the competitors were Booth, tall and supple, with a long reach; Pereira, whose net play was tremendous; solid Vicars, the steadiest of all the local team, notorious for his well-placed services and perfectly timed smashes; Jacks, Simpson, and Bell.

The match opened with Booth and Simpson; the latter was entirely outclassed, and the result proved an easy victory for Booth, with two sets to love. Jacks and Bell were the next competitors. This was by no means an exciting contest, as the pair played a stolid matter-of-fact game, with no sensational rallies, and the result was a score to Jacks of two sets to one.

In the next match, the winners of the first round faced each other, and Jacks was unable to make any stand against Booth's well-placed drives. Vicars and Pereira now came upon the scene, and both being fresh, this proved to be one of the longest and hardest fought sets of the afternoon. Loud and many were the shouts of "Good ball" and "Well up," and deuce was called five times in the third set, before Vicars, with two beautiful smashes, scored the winning game. And now came the critical moment, when Vicars and Booth were to meet; the winner to claim the prize.

Many of the elders looked on in blissful innocence, and commented on the capital contest.

"Such good exercise for the poor fellows," declared Madame Tanzy ("Madame" sounded more ear-filling and important than Missis, and Madame claimed the prefix—as due to her French ancestry), who established herself beside her demure, but bewitching niece.

"I wonder where Vernon is this afternoon?" said Mrs. Holland, looking around as she spoke.

"He has gone down to Arkonum," replied her husband. "I heard him offer to take Webb's duty."

"What a pity he is absent! He generally goes in for handicaps, and is so keen on tennis."

After a short rest, the critical moment arrived—a moment of palpitating anxiety for Annie Wilson, on the result of the contest, possibly depended her fate matrimonial, and whether the order to Whiteaway & Laidlaw was to be countermanded or no? Oh, how fervently she prayed for the success of Charlie Booth!

Serving from the best court, Booth took the first game, but Vicars the next two, with some remarkable play. Booth's service was admirable throughout, he showed tremendous agility at the net, his drives along the side line were magnificent, and he was ahead four to two. Then came Rosita's sudden laugh, and the unusual spectacle of Charlie Booth nervous and flurried; he no longer played with confidence; thrice he made double faults, and failed to recover his nerve and equanimity. During Vicars' service, there was a prolonged struggle with long and exciting rallies, he got to forty fifteen and then scored four all. The ninth game went to Vicars, with a succession of brilliant back-handed returns; Vicars also won the tenth, amidst loud clapping and frantic enthusiasm.

The second set proved a hard one. Booth made a desperate attempt to retrieve his fortune, and after a gallant fight with brilliant hits, pulled up four to four. There were many breathless moments; these moments were Vicars' opportunity, and steadiness his motto; he took the next game love. Booth then for a moment regained his good form, and with several well-placed balls, brought the game to five all. This effort, however, had exhausted his energies, and Vicars, the stolid and steady, took the last two games with com-

parative ease, thus winning the Saturday sweepstake, and Rosita's prize.

Those who were not in the secret, openly wondered why the hot and exhausted champion should immediately go and bow himself, bat in hand, before Miss Fontaine? Why Booth should retire muttering oaths? why Simpson swallowed a four-fingered "peg"? and why Miss Annie Wilson had deserted the grounds in, it was whispered—tears!

But Rosita was supremely indifferent to such insignificant matters, and she laughed, and talked and flirted with the victor, who, although a total abstainer, felt intoxicated with his own success! And wise lookers-on murmured to one another "that Rosita would have Vicars off the hook in *no* time!"

As the last red gleam of the sun disappeared, and the soft Indian dusk descended on the gardens, the company dispersed. Most of the men strolled into the Institute to play billiards, or read the papers, and a select little band, under Madame Tanzy's charge, repaired to the theatre, there to rehearse, for the forthcoming theatricals.

CHAPTER X

SLEEK, soft, supple, and full of mischief as any kitten, Rosita resembled the great feline tribe in yet another respect; never suffering her prey, long though she might play with it, to escape beyond the reach of her remorseless paw. Although Vernon had been shocked, disillusioned and defrauded, his lady-love would not relax her hold over him; frantically as he might struggle for freedom, there was no release for the victims of Mademoiselle Fontaine. She had noticed that Vernon

pointedly evaded her in the Gardens and Institute; that he seemed to be surprisingly often "on duty," and failed to offer her an opportunity of bestowing on him a word, or even a smile; moreover he had declined two invitations to tea! Rosita resolved to play the bold game, and to call at the Coffey house on some pretence, cross-question Katty, flatter the old woman into a good humour, and leave a note and parcel for Katty's favourite boarder.

One morning, shortly after breakfast, Rosita boldly sallied forth on a sort of forlorn hope (for most people lived in mortal fear of Mrs. Coffey's tongue and temper). She was accompanied by her chief friend and disciple, Coquellino de Castro, a little dark girl with a round face and a pair of wonderful and wondering black eyes. Unfortunately, Coquellino proved but a cowardly ally.

"Ah, Rosita—I do not wish to go to the Coffey house," she protested. "No, no—I am so awfullee a-fraid of Mistress Coffey—she does say such bad things. Oh, my! I feel *hot* when I think of them. Do not go to her. Better not."

"I don't care what she says!" declared the courageous Rosita; "she will not say anything to me—why should she?"

Coquellino giggled convulsively, but made no other reply.

"I have a chit and a little present here for Vernon," confided her patroness. "I want to slip it in somewhere in the quarters, so that it will be sure to catch his eye. I cannot send it by post, you know, and if I gave it to Katty, there would be such a terrible talk and bobbery."

"Ai—yea—yo! There is always talk!" agreed Coquellino, "and such chatter about you, Rosita. Just because you are so pretty, and other people are

so ugly," and she cracked her finger-joints, in superior native fashion.

Katty Coffey was a thrifty, hard-working woman, with a high Cork brogue and at times an impassioned manner, who openly boasted "that she kept herself to herself." She also maintained her house and her household in tip-top order. Like other strong rulers, she had one weak point—her favourites. These were her Burmese game-fowl, a breed which she nourished and cherished, as if they were actually her own flesh and blood.

"I shall ask for a sitting of eggs," announced Rosita, after a reflective silence, as she and her friend strolled across a burnt-up open space, overlooked by various quarters. "I'll say that Mrs. Baker of Madras has heard of the Tani-Kul game-fowl."

"But who is Mrs. Baker?" inquired Coquellino.

"Oh, I don't know," responded her companion with splendid indifference. "There is sure to be a Mrs. Baker in such a big city."

"Whatt! So you will make it up. Oh, my!" and Coquellino stared at her friend with round-eyed admiration. "Oh, noh, noh, you never could!" But in her heart she knew that Rosita could, and would, compass whatsoever she pleased. Had she not reft from her, her beautiful name of Carmencita, and branded her in exchange with that of Coquellino? and Coquellino she would remain until her dying day! Yes, Rosita was wonderful, she managed to get everything she desired. Did not her Dirzee work for her on feast days, and sometimes stay overtime—for nothing? Did not the hawkers give her extra measure, the Bazaar-master gifts of fruit and flowers; did not all the young men worship her? Rosita was a queen, an absolute sovereign, in the opinion of her adoring slave.

"The Coffey house" (so called, because the Coffeys

were quartered there) was an abode of two stories, with a lower, and upper verandah. In the latter the busy mistress was violently shaking a mat when she descried her visitors. She paused, dramatically, mat in hand.

"Oh, Mrs. Coffey," screamed Rosita, "I do want to ask you something—may we come up?"

Before she could frame a negative, the girls were already on the stairs.

"It is about Mrs. Baker of Egmore," began Rosita, a little breathlessly; "it is a message for you from her."

"And what may it be?" demanded Katty, with her grimmest expression. "I've to me knowledge, no acquaintance in Mad-thrass."

"She has heard of your wonderful poultry, even there," glibly responded the lying spirit.

Katty, who had intended to chase away this impudent hussy, was immediately propitiated. Her stern face relaxed, and as she turned down her sleeves she asked with a complacent air:

"An' what will she be wanting? Is it eggs, or hins, she's afther?"

"She would like both—but she told me to see you, and find out the price; and how much they would cost to go by rail, and—" with an abrupt change of tone, "Whose room is this you are dusting?" moving to an open door. "Mr. Vernon's, I am sure—it looks so——"

"See now, ye can't be going in there!" remonstrated Katty; "I won't have ye pokin' in the young men's rooms—it's not dacint."

"What harm when they are empty!" scoffed Rosita, pushing past her into a very bare apartment. There was a cot, a washstand, chairs, and an old military chest of drawers (possibly once the property of some notable hero; now cast up, after many auctions, in

Mrs. Coffey's best top-room); there was a battered portmanteau in a corner, an old smoking coat hanging behind the door, and that was all.

"Come away—come away—can't ye?" urged Katty; "ye have no call up here at all, so ye haven't!"

"I suppose this is Booth's room," continued Rosita. "Oh, *mon Dieu!* what an untidy place—boots, towels and coats flung about—and his cot in the verandah. Oh, Mrs. Coffey!" she suddenly cried in a voice of high excitement, "do look—look—see there—two of your cocks are fighting! Oh, oh! they'll kill one another, won't they?" Her expression and gestures were tragic.

The hint proved sufficient, Katty, duster in hand, snatched up a broom, and dashed down the stairs with astonishing precipitancy. The instant her back was turned, Rosita darted into Vernon's room and laid a little parcel on the top of an alarum clock which stood on the chest of drawers, where it could not fail to attract attention.

"Oh, my! you *are* clevar!" exclaimed Coquellino as side by side they hurried below. "I'd never, never have thought of thatt—and my! whatt an awful story you told! Here she comes—won't she be angry?"

Angry? Yes, Mrs. Coffey was filled with wrath. Her sharp face had assumed the colour of a time-worn brick, when the two girls accosted her on the lower verandah. She was also heated and breathless; her mind invaded by the horrible suspicion that the French hussy had made a fool of her!

"Why, the fowl was at the other side!" she panted, "an' a nice fright ye giv' me, and have me teeming with the heat, for I suspicioned it was the old wan an' his son, who are always making shapes at one another.

I suppose ye thought you'd try your hand at taking in Katty Coffey, as well as the boys ? "

" It was only a mistake," declared Rosita, with a titter. " They must have flown away ! No one in Tani-Kul would dare to take in Mrs. Coffey," she added, with a peculiar smile.

" An' what about this lady in Mad-thrass—what will she be wanting ? Has she given ye an order or not ? I can't be wastin' all me day wid the likes of yees. What did she say ? "

" Oh—she said—she asked me—to—to—to look at your fowl—and—and—and—a——"

As she hesitated, Mrs. Coffey intercepted a lightning wink, intended for Coquellino, and burst out :

" See now, yer making all this up as ye go along ! Mrs. Baker of Egmore indeed ! Ye have come over here wid some cock and bull story " (no pun intended by Katty) " for your own inds—shure, an' I might have known ye by this time, an' that ye'd be the last in the worruld to oblige any wan, and since ye *are* here, I'll just put something off me mind, an' I tell ye what's no news in the station. Ye are playing old Harry in Tani-Kul for all yer pretty face—and a pretty face is the divil's trap."

Rosita, with her usual exasperating laugh, was about to push by Mrs. Coffey, and effect a victorious retreat.

" No, ye don't, me dear ! " declared Katty, barring the way, broom in hand, " not till I'm done with ye—and Mrs. Baker of Egmore, and her eggs. What about young Dargan of the volunteers that had an *accident*, with his rifle—and died ? they say his blood is on your hands ! " Here Katty gasped—painfully. " There's Charlie Booth, a long tongs of a fellow, but decent enough chap, teetotally destroyed since ye got hold of him. Half the day he does not know whether he is

standing on his head or his heels! He is fined for over-carrying parcels, and missing trains, and not sending in his guard reports in time, and it's all along of *you*—just you, ye tricky little divil! And Simpson, poor boy, is fairly distracted over yer painted cheeks, and rolling eyes, and has taken to spirits since ye giv' him the chuck. Faix, if they knew as much about you as *I* do, not one of them would take ye—no, not if ye were thrown after them."

"Painted cheeks! Thrown after them!" screamed Rosita, now furious in her turn. "You hideous old pig of a sweeper woman!" and she suddenly broke into a cataract of French, whose velocity and overwhelming force seemed to carry all before it. That she was being violently denounced in an unknown language, naturally added oil to the flames of Katty's fury; she had inherited the vivid imagination of the Celt, which supplied her ignorance with blazing words. She recalled the days of her barrack life, and occasional outpourings in wash-house, and Patchary. This screaming little rat was saying the same sort of things of her, to her face—the same sort, but *worse*—oh, she was sure of it!

And when the invincible Rosita came to a momentary pause, her vituperation ended from sheer lack of breath, Katty, altogether beside herself, figuratively fell upon her, sword in hand.

"No, ye don't stir a foot till I've given ye me mind," she said, resolutely barring the way, "an' then I'll sweep ye, and yer yellow jackal out of me dacint house!" In a series of short, excited sentences, Mrs. Coffey rose to the heights of invective. In a few scathing words, she proceeded to deliver her opinions of Rosita, and pitilessly dissected her pedigree, her appearance, her morals, and above all her "*carrac-ther*," concluding with:

"An' see here, and now mind, what I'm tellin' ye. If ever ye try any of yer games on Vernon, such as ye've played with other young fellows—aye—and married men too—thank God, Coffey can't bear the sight of ye, and he says if *he* was yer father he'd give ye a rare good belting! Mind that—if ye meddle with *Vernon*, I'll put the priest on ye, so I will, and have ye chased out of Tani-Kul into the Burra Bazaar. 'Tis where ye had a right to be—and here now—out you go!" and suddenly moving aside, Katty, with blazing eyes and uplifted broom, literally drove forth the whimpering Coquellino, and the Beauty of Tani-Kal, shouting so as passers-by could hear.

"*Now* I'm going to wash down the place afther the pair of yees!" With which astonishing announcement, she paused, completely breathless and exhausted.

This description of *congé* was too much for Rosita, who turned at bay, scarlet with fury, and shaking her little bony fist, spat on the ground and shrieked back in the piercing Tamil tongue:

"Pi-shasha-ki-poh! Shasha-ki-poh! Shasha-ki-poh!" which being simply interpreted means, "Go to the devil, to the devil, to the devil!"

The matron, too horrified, and astonished to retort, suffered Mademoiselle Fontaine to march away, proudly conscious of the prestige of having fired the last shot. Nevertheless, in spite of her last shot, Rosita's was but a Pyrrhic victory! She and her companion, worn out by the recent conflict, retired from the engagement in a shattered and depressed condition, merely exchanging disjointed ejaculations, as they jostled along side by side. For once, Rosita had heard what some people thought of her extravagance, her dress, her debts, and her lies. The distressing part was that a certain grain of truth lay embedded in these shocking statements. Furious as she felt, her fury soon cooled, but her *amour*

propre had received a cruel blow. Coquellino had merely been called "a yellow jackal," which was nothing! But what had not the old beast called *her*? And the woman's "so I tell ye" and "so I tell ye" still rang in her hot ears. Hateful, accursed, old hag. Well, she would punish her—yes—and through Vernon. Vernon was Katty's *enfant de la maison*—it was for his sake she had ventured into the lair of the tigress, and been most cruelly mauled. Vernon should pay! Rosita was at once so shaken, and demoralized that she betook herself to bed, with a headache and the battered "colonial edition" of a popular novel.

As for Mrs. Coffey, she also had experienced a reaction, and realized that she was growing too old to indulge in the luxury of "letting herself go." As soon as she had got the better of "a palpitation," and somewhat recovered her equanimity, she sought comfort in a cup of long drawn black tea, and prudently resolved to keep the encounter a secret, and never "let on" to Booth and Vernon, the awful "basting" she had that day administered to the Beauty of Tani-Kul!

When Vernon ran up to his room to change his coat for supper, he was aware of something unusual in the atmosphere—unusual here, and yet familiar elsewhere! As he sniffed the air, he said to himself:

"What the dickens is it?—patchouli, by Jove!"

Then suddenly, a certain large white envelope arrested his attention; it was addressed to "Mr. Vernon." With a bounding heart he recognized Rosita's writing, and unless one of his senses played him false, she had left the parcel with her own hands,—how wonderful, how daring! But daring deeds and wonderful excursions, were as the breath of the young lady's nostrils.

As Vernon tore open the envelope, his heart thumped, and his fingers actually shook—was it the photograph?

It was: and a most delightful picture, across which was written, with a gigantic flourish, "Rosita de Ligne-Fontaine." Besides the portrait, a little lilac note was enclosed—lilac paper, with a golden R. in the left-hand corner, and this was what was written in that deliciously scented note:

"Deer Fiend,

"For tho you will not be my fiend, I still am yours. You are so cross with little Rosita, but why? The tenis was a joak, and the prize after all, goes to the house of Annie Wilson, it will be in her droring-room, and where is the sin in that? Are you not sorry, you made such a *tapage* for nothing? Why are you so grave, so jalouse—I am never jalouse or grave. I know you are on duty to-morrow. It will make me happy if you will come and meat me on Thursday in the Gardens, at four o'clock at the gold mohur trees. I will expect you. *Tout à vous*,

"ROSITA."

This note and the photograph, combined to transport Vernon into the seventh heaven; so, after all, Rosita did care for him. Her little caprices about a dance, and even the tennis prize, were now entirely obliterated. He set up the photograph before him, and his eyes "did Pooja" as they travelled between that and the note. Surely he was the happiest fellow in India, as she was the loveliest girl, the most charming, the only one in the world for him! In a condition of rapt absorption, the infatuated young fellow entirely forgot his supper, till the hoarse shouts of Coffey, and Mrs. Coffey's foot upon the stairs, recalled him to earth, and everyday mortals. As he seized a brush, and vigorously belaboured his hair, the face that confronted him in the cheap looking-glass looked radiant—it was

the face of a boy! He laughed back at his own reflection, thrust the note and the photograph into his inner pocket, and hurried headlong below.

Supper was served in the verandah. Mr. and Mrs. Coffey, Booth and Nokes—an elderly guard—were already seated at a table covered by a stout Basle Mission cloth, and adorned by one large tight bunch of marigolds—those noisome flowers beloved of the gods!

Vernon had no appetite—a most unusual occurrence; he was not even to be tempted by succulent brain cutlets, much less dâl curry, and plantain fritters. In fact, he scarcely ate a mouthful, and was loudly chaffed by Booth and scolded by Mrs. Coffey. It seemed to her that the boy looked strange, his mind was absent, his thoughts were wandering; he had eaten Booth's bread, and helped himself twice to salt; had a queer uplifted sort of look in his face, and not a single word to throw to a dog—no, not even to Pat the faithful yellow "pi" who invariably waited at table. What had that girl been up to when she sent her on a wild goose chase? Ah, she had it! Rosita had left him a note, and fooled her all round.

Vernon was far too happy to waste the rapturous hours in sleep. He sat smoking cigarette after cigarette in the upper verandah, gazing out on the soft Indian night, listening to familiar sounds, the weird cries of hunting jackals, the distant thudding of Bazaar tom-toms, and occasional "swish" of a rocket, betokening some betrothal or marriage feast, and all the time his mind was dwelling on *her*, with awed and blissful contemplation. He felt a little sorry for poor old Charlie Booth, who, in ignorance of his irreparable loss, lay extended on his cot, enjoying the sound healthy sleep of one who has earned his rest. Nevertheless his gentle, regular snores proved an irritating accompani-

ment to Vernon's exalted frame of mind, and presently he got up and went below, impelled by an overwhelming desire to walk with his thoughts alone.

His head was full of schemes, his heart was full of joy. Visions of Rosita, and possible promotion shared the enchanting hours. At last, feeling rather weary after a long and aimless tramp, during which he had confided his ecstasy to the stars, and to the veiled, mysterious night, Vernon found himself close to the goods shed. Three o'clock had just been struck by the station gurrah; he realized that it was too late now to think of sleep. Besides this, Mrs. Coffey's pet pariah (a large yellow specimen with inquisitive amber eyes) acted not only as *concierge*, but alarum; and whenever Booth or Nokes happened to be late, the brute celebrated their return by rending the warm, still darkness with long-drawn, melancholy wails. No, no, he decided that it was not worth while to turn in, and brave curiosity. Happy thought—he might as well draw Gojar, and see what the old fellow was doing with himself.

CHAPTER XI

HAVING made his way into the goods sheds, Vernon looked about for Gojar, and when his eyes had become accustomed to the gloom, presently discovered the man he wanted huddled in a brown blanket, and squatting on the ground with his fox terrier and lantern beside him. Hearing footsteps, he sprang to his feet and raised the light above his head; as soon as he had recognized his visitor he said:

"Ah, it is you, Vernon Sahib! What does the Cherisher of the Poor desire here—so late?"

He spoke in Tamil, with the usual glibness of the

race; there was not the faintest trace of an Englishman about him now.

Vernon stood stock still and surveyed the watchman with a grave and contemplative expression. The thin, finely-cut nose, the haughty, piercing eyes, the long, thick beard, surely were those of a Mahomedan from the far North? All classes and races drifted up and down and in and out of a great junction like Tani-Kul.

Was his experience a dream? Had the fellow, even in the jaws of death, been fooling him? He could swear that this bearded, turbaned man had never been out of India. Well, whoever he was, he had evidently changed his mind; a momentary confidential impulse had flickered up and died, and he was not disposed to betray either himself or his history—if he had one. Vernon made no reply to Gojar's question; he stood with his hands in his pockets, surveying the watchman from head to foot, then, with a glance at his dog and his lantern, turned abruptly and walked away. He had made several strides, when a long arm forcibly arrested him.

"Come back," said Gojar in English; "come back with me, and sit among the bales of cotton. You were thinking that I have a short memory, and so I have—sometimes."

"Well, I won't mind putting a strain on it to-night, thank you," rejoined Vernon, and there was a note of sarcasm in his voice.

"Come, come," urged Gojar authoritatively, "you are not the huffy sort! I was actually thinking of you, when you came so quietly, and stood before me. See, here is a good place," and he indicated a sort of divan, composed of cotton sacks; "sit down—this"—indicating a stout terrier—"is Tom Sahib—he is a gentleman; now you know my belongings."

Vernon mechanically accepted the invitation, and Gojar placed himself opposite, and set the lantern between them.

"You may smoke," he said, "I'll take care there is no fire."

"And you?" said Vernon, offering his cigarette case.

"Bah!" with a gesture of his long, lean hand, "that is not *my* smoke, though once I smoked cigarettes all day. Why are you not in bed—it is past three o'clock?"

"I went for a long tramp after gun-fire, and was not disposed to turn in. It's hardly worth while, as my train goes for Podanur at 4.30."

"Surely no excuse is necessary," said Gojar suavely; "when one is in love, sleep flies out of the window. Oh, I've been through all that myself."

Vernon coloured up to his hair. What did this debased Englishman know of him and Rosita? He was about to speak, when Gojar resumed:

"I have been thinking of you every night as I sit here from gun-fire till the crow's dawn, and feeling that somehow you wanted—*help*."

"Yet when I came in just now you gave me the dead cut."

"Yes, I confess that needs explanation. It was a momentary impulse, a temptation; a temptation that flew at me, seized me, and said: 'Why give away a secret you have hoarded for fifteen years; how do you know that this young fellow will hold his tongue? and that it will not be all over Tani-Kul, that Gojar is an English loafer—you will be kicked out, and sent to the Asylum for "poor Whites," where you will make a miserable end. Keep your mouth shut, Gojar, let the fellow suppose that you were mad, or that he was mad—it does not matter which!'"

"But I gave you my word of honour," said Vernon haughtily.

"You did; but words of honour have been broken even when they pass between two nations. Yes, and in high places, too. All the same, I trust you, for as it happens I like you."

Was it possible that Gojar the Watchman, sitting there in patched dungaree trousers and a shabby blanket, was presuming to patronize him? Vernon endeavoured to smother an overpowering inclination to laugh.

"Yes, yes, young man," resumed the watchman, "laugh when you can! A time may be coming, when you laugh no longer, but to-night you are out of yourself—you are as a prince," he paused and stared fixedly, into the face of his visitor. "I am talking a lot of rot—am I not?"

"At any rate, Gojar, you talk plain English, and I should like to know, how you keep it up since Tamil is supposed to be your native tongue?—I can bear witness that you can swear in it to the manner born; and yet you say, that for fifteen years, you have played the native—never mixing with *us*. How is it that your English is so fluent—not a bit rusty, eh?"

"A natural question, and I will tell you. In the first place I do speak broken English, yes, every day, though never to you; secondly, I read a great deal. Beside the vernacular Press—for the most part full of malicious propaganda—they take English papers in the native drink shops; also I subscribe and get books and magazines secondhand. Thirdly, the old native woman who lives with me, and does my cooking and valeting, was once an Ayah, and has lived long in English families. She has been to London, and loves beer; she even drops her h's, and we speak the language when we are alone. Rajee, or Mary Ann, is a

withered old hag, half Christian, half heathen, and the neighbours believe she is my *mother!*"

Here Gojar again emitted one of his hoarse and discordant laughs.

"I suppose she knows—some of your—er—er—past?" Vernon hesitated.

"Yes, a certain portion—as much as is good for her. Rajee is a truly faithful woman; her patience and unselfishness are those of a saint. We are, in short, saint, and sinner—for I am irreclaimable."

Gojar paused and coughed; the cough of the Ganja smoker echoed through the great dark goods shed.

"I daresay you think I am an old man," he resumed. "I am fifty-three; as for my name, that is no matter, but you will be perhaps surprised to hear, that I, Gojar, night watchman, drawing twelve Government rupees a month, sitting before you with regulation lamp and belt, was formerly an officer and gentleman!"

An inarticulate ejaculation escaped from his listener.

"Aye, there's not much sign of either about *me*, is there? but once upon a time, I was in a crack cavalry regiment—the very one that passed through here, and left the horse behind. If things had been different—if I had kept straight—I might have commanded them. Well, all that is, as Kipling says, another story—of course I read Kipling—many a tale I could *tell him:* Lord, what copy! What amazing mysteries, what splendid deeds and horrors unbelievable I have witnessed. And why not? When you come to think of it, I have drifted over India like a derelict for twenty long years, going to and fro on the earth like another individual. I've been in Persia, in Burmah, the Nicobars, Madras, and, south of it, the Deccan, Bombay, Lucknow, Peshawur—railway fare third class is cheap, and I've travelled north,

south, east, and west and finally fetched up here. I tell you again that I've seen strange sights, and I've seen India; not merely its cities, tombs, temples, that the globe-trotter flashes through, not the trim military cantonments and hill stations—I know India under the skin—I have learnt the patience, the repose, the stubborn intractability of the East."

Vernon removed his cigarette, and stared at the speaker in undisguised surprise. What a remarkable description—this shadowy lunatic was a man of culture!

"Yes, I've been down in the slime of the Bazaars," he continued, "and through the opium dens in Calcutta and Rangoon. I've seen devil worship; I've witnessed the most hideous sacrifices—especially in the south, where the old gods die hard."

"What sort of sacrifices do you mean?" asked his listener.

"Sacrifices for fertility—there, I need not tell *you*, a barren season, means the death of millions of men and animals. Long ago, the offerings made were human beings, and to-day, sometimes, in certain districts, such sacrifices are not unknown. Naturally the Sirkar calls it Murder—the other, and real term, is never even whispered. I myself, have seen the dead body of a handsome youth, who had been sacrificed to Kali: bled at the wrists and ankles, and disembowelled after the fashion of the ancient augurs; but such a case as that is extremely rare. After human beings, horses were offered, then cattle, as in the Old Testament and sheep and goats. Now in most instances the sacrifices have dwindled to a fowl, sweetmeats and flowers; yet at times of great scarcity, or impending famine, the ancient methods are resumed. You see, the idea is that blood is the life; the land requires life—otherwise how can it be fruitful?"

"I see that India is a thousand years behind Europe," muttered the young man.

"Once, disguised as a native, I was present at the great annual festival at Vezwada," continued Gojar. "It was after sundown; many baskets of rice were contributed by the citizens to the sacrificial pile. On this pile, a drove of buffaloes was killed by the Poojaris; the animal's heads were hacked off, the carcasses carried away for food—all but one foreleg, which was placed in the brutes' mouths. Then two enormous carts were loaded with the red rice, and stacked with the gruesome trophies; at the four corners of each were high iron stakes, on which were impaled alternately four live pigs, and four live lambs. The carts were led through the Bazaars, the rice distributed by the Poojaris to be scattered over the land, and set before the next sundown. The scene was horrible; I shall never forget the hideous procession, the maddening tom-toms, the blare of horns, and frantic crowds, and the flaring torches illuminating the red dripping carts, with their writhing, shrieking victims."

"Ugh!" ejaculated Vernon, "I'm glad I was not with you."

"So am I," rejoined Gojar grimly, "for your life would not have been worth the ash of your cigarette! Well, now I have talked my share, and told you some of my experiences, let us talk about *you*."

"I'm afraid I am not a very promising topic; what is there to say?"

"Much. Were you ever in the Service?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because you have certainly been drilled."

"Yes, you are right there; I was going into the Line—through the Militia."

"Oh, the Militia!" with an inflexion of scorn in his voice; "and you were spun, I suppose? Now I

went to Sandhurst, and passed out second; much good it has done me! I was supposed to be clever; at one time I was even sub-editor of the regimental paper. Ha! ha! Here I go harking back on myself. Well, to return to you; we will not touch upon the first twenty years of your life," he looked at Vernon interrogatively.

"Why not?" rejoined the young man. "Since you have told me so much, I'm bound to—to—say something. I am not out here, doing time, so to speak, for pleasure, as you may imagine. If I were in India of my own accord, of course I'd like to be in the Service, but I've been unlucky, and stupid, and an ass, that's all—and I got into a row like that fellow in the play, who sold the pictures of his ancestors—I forget his name now. There, you see what a duffer I am—I've no head."

"Was there a woman at the bottom of the business?" inquired Gojar, fixing his drug-laden eyes on the young fellow.

Vernon nodded; his expression was grim.

"Well, never mind; we will stick to the last five or six years, when you have grown to be a man, and have fought your way like a man so far. But now, my dear young friend, you are coming to an awkward bit of road, and I believe I can put you over it."

"Oh, will you? Then you see further ahead than I do. At present I feel all right."

"Ah, yes, I'm aware that your foot is on the primrose path," and he stared hard into Vernon's face; "but it will not be all flowers. You have helped me, and I will help you; my goodwill is yours, and I may do more than you would expect from old Gojar, with his lantern and his terrier," and he stooped down, and patted the sleeping dog. "I have spoken of experiences, and I will tell you one of the strangest. Once

when I was up country, I happened to be in the same serai with a Persian horse-dealer—an oldish man who was very sick—in fact, he died. I was sorry for the poor beggar, and did what I could for him—you see, I spoke his language, the most persuasive tongue on earth—and one night, before the end he gave me this."

Here Gojar produced a leather pouch, and from this, after much searching, he produced a little bone ring, in which was set a large flawed turquoise.

"It does not look like a valuable legacy, but if the Persian was to be believed this shabby little article" —now exhibiting it on the palm of a hand which showed the swollen veins of the Ganja smoker—"this old battered thing, mean as it appears, is out of the common—for it is credited with miraculous powers, and can command the Lords of Life and Death."

"The Lords of Life and Death," repeated Vernon, as he turned it over with a somewhat doubtful air. "I expect the poor old chap was off his chump, and raving mad."

"No. At one time when the fever was on him he did ramble a lot about beautiful Ispahan, and her fruit orchards, and minarets; but latterly he was quite sensible. I can see him in his lair in the serai, his hair matted with sweat, the one oil lamp flaring on the wall, showing up his sunken face; I seem to hear the wrangling round the fires outside, and the stamping, and neighing of horses, and to smell the camels, and the wood smoke. The man was something of a Seer, and he said to me, 'You are a Sahib under your old Puttoo coat.' I was buying ponies for a tonga contractor at the great Mela, and the place was crammed full of all sorts of men. 'Yes, you are a Sahib,' he said, 'and have been a fool, yet there is still some good in you, for you can be—as now—benevolent. This ring, which

is older than Timoor, will never benefit you, but it will benefit others, when it is in your charge. After sunset hold it in your left hand, close your eyes, and your wish will be accomplished. This ring has no power for evil." "

"It sounds like Aladdin and the wonderful lamp—you rub the ring, the genie appears. Have you ever tried it?" asked Vernon with a smile of broad amusement.

"No, never as yet, and it has been in my charge for years; a man such as I am, has no friends—no human being he desires to benefit. Once or twice I was about to throw it away, but something held me back—perhaps the *something* that sent you to the left that day—who knows?—and it takes up no room. Well now, after so long I intend to test it, on your behalf. Give it to me."

Vernon handed it back, and Gojar, closing his fingers over the ring, shut his eyes. Presently he opened them, and, turning to his visitor, said:

"I have wished; and wished you well."

"Will you tell me your wish?"

"No."

"But why? How can you possibly know what I desire?"

"I do know." A pause. "If I were to tell you my wish it would break the spell, and if you heard it—you would be angry."

"You talk in riddles!"

"And why not? Am I not a riddle that no one has guessed? You are a riddle, that has puzzled the settlement—but does not puzzle old Gojar. Birth has given you caste, and do what you will, and eagerly as you throw yourself into this life, and associate with Tom, Dick and Harry, you do not *match* your surroundings! You are a misfit—a popular misfit, I grant, and an object of curiosity."

"I do not see why anyone should bother themselves about my affairs as long as I do my work."

"My own idea precisely. The folks here never dream that I am a European, and therefore I am not a subject of speculation—merely a queer type of heathen, half man, half devil—sometimes all devil. I got a post through a fellow who recognized me as he was going round the wards of a hospital. Yes, gaunt, broken, brutalized, as I was, he saw that it was no use trying to do much for me, or to get me home, but he had influence on the line, and he put me above the reach of starvation. I have my twelve rupees a month; I am on a night job, which suits my character, and here in Tani-Kul Bazaar I shall live, and eventually die. Ganja is my god; at times when the craving is fierce—when I feel that my twelve chillums (pipes) a day are as nothing—I withdraw to my den, slake the thirst that is blistering my tongue, and send in a substitute. By and by I come back; the railway folk wink at my lapses, for I am an honest man—now, and I make a first-class watchman; no pilfering of goods, no cutting of sacks, no leaking of grain when Gojar is around."

Vernon sat silent, merely nodding his head in mechanical assent; he was thinking of Rosita; involuntarily from time to time his hand went to his breast-pocket—the precious letter was there.

"Now here you see," continued Gojar, suddenly striking his chest, "in real life, and with your own eyes, the spectacle which people hint at, or discuss with bated breath: an English gentleman who has lost caste, creed, place and name, who has been swept into the Bazaars—and gone under."

"Oh, but you need not talk like that—that is all rot, you can be pulled out," declared his visitor with an air of conviction.

"I!" exclaimed Gojar. "Never; I am rooted, I

am given over body and soul to Ganja, the delight-giver. When I dream transcendent dreams I am happy."

"And do you never dream of England, and home, and your own people?" inquired Vernon.

"Never."

"They suppose you to be dead?"

"They do, please God."

"And you have no desire to see them, or return?"

"No," replied Gojar with emphasis. "I have no status, no interest, no relations; I have no desire, or wish for anything but my chillum of Ganja."

"And what is Ganja?"

"Oh, just the flower of the hemp plant. Bhang, made from the leaf, is the poor man's narcotic—but Ganja for me! Above all Kakā-poti—'dog's tooth,' Ganja." His eyes glistened at the mere name. "A man I know supplies me with first-class stuff; I take it in various ways—sometimes in a ball with spices—that is the five jewels."

"And what are those?"

"Opium, arsenic, datura, oleander."

"Enough to poison a crowd—filthy stuff! What can be its fascination?"

"Those wonderful people, the Chinese—realized its value six centuries before Christ! It induces forgetfulness of all mental trouble—it is an elixir. Wonderful ideas crowd the brain; you float in the ether. It is said that he who smokes Ganja forgets even his own name. I desire to forget all, and when I take Ganja I feel myself as a king or a god; but the best is—forgetfulness. It would be useless to *you*. Just now you wish to remember; to recall a face, a voice—memory and hope are at present your stars. And now we have talked much—or I have—and yet I have never said the three words I wish to say, the warning I would utter. It

is this"—slowly nodding his head—"*avoid Rosita Fontaine.*"

For a second, Vernon was too astounded to find speech.

"I am not night watchman for nothing," he continued, "nor for nothing do I dwell in the Bazaar. It is the face of Circe herself! Like Circe, she turns her lovers into swine——"

"Stop!" cried Vernon furiously; "that's enough. What the devil are you talking about? How dare you take her pure name upon your lips?"

"The devil I am talking about is a *she*-devil, an *idol.* A goddess, who demands human sacrifice!" replied Gojar with composure. "Dare! I've dared a good deal in my time, and I'd venture more than that for you. No use to urge, or advise, to point to her type, her tastes. No"—waving aside an interruption—"I might as well talk to these sacks; and I should only make you hate me. My hope is with Rosita; she will never marry you. Rosita is ambitious; she has a heart of stone and the will to shake the world!" Looking into Vernon's set face he added, "Yes, I have made you furious—you will never come here again. Well, there is the gurrah! The settlement will soon be stirring—let us both to our *dreams*," and seizing his stick and lantern Gojar suddenly rose to his feet and glided away, attended by his dog.

CHAPTER XII

THE bandstand at Tani-Kul represented the outdoor meeting-place of the entire community. To be strictly truthful, there was rarely a band, but the round white platform was conspicuous, and stood in the centre of a

neatly kept enclosure known as the Public Gardens. "Public" undoubtedly; as to gardens—two malees and a bheesti were in the Company's employ, who picked and swept and watered industriously; but arid plains, sun-beaten for ten months in the year, are not sympathetic to flowers. There were a certain amount of hardy zinnias and marigolds, several score of tenderly cherished crotons, and calladiums—entrenched in pots against the ravages of white ants—and shrouding the trellis work in every direction, the inevitable railway creeper, flourishing as befitted its title, and making the most of its opportunities. As for shade, a sickly tamarind and two frail gold mohur trees, did their utmost to remind beholders, that elsewhere there were such things as trees!

If flowers and shadows were absent from the enclosure, the garden had one claim to favour in beautifully kept hard red walks, lined with trimmed box—the pride and glory of the malees' hearts. In the fresh early morning, or after sundown, these paths were crowded by numbers of folk seeking relaxation, society and air—married women, and the older men, who had no taste for bicycle excursions along the dusty, monotonous road. Of course the young fellows played rackets and cricket, or went out shooting—the girls patronized tennis and badminton, but the middle-aged and children favoured the garden, and its walks. What tales those paths could relate of the topics discussed by those who so soberly paced them. Was not the whole history, ancient and modern, of Tani-Kul there related? At four o'clock on Saturday, the Gardens were to be seen at their best; badminton and tennis were in full swing, children were playing by the well, and various men, matrons and maids, were reposing on seats, or promenading in couples.

Here we behold the portly Vicars, complacent in

spotless drill, and wearing a bright blue satin tie, strolling along in company with Mrs. Wilson, his future mother-in-law; Annie, who coyly lags behind with her sister, is clothed in smiles—we trust therefore that all is well, and that the trousseau is actually in hand. Seated under one of the gold mohur trees (a place of honour) we observe Mrs. Sharratt fanning herself with a large paper fan illustrating a bull-fight—an article forgotten in a railway carriage, and never claimed.

At the moment she is discoursing with eloquence on the subject of "fashions" to her neighbour, Mrs. Beard—who would suppose it to look at her costume? But it is one of the simple matron's delusions, that she dresses in good style! There is Katty Coffey, enjoying an hour off duty, promenading with her friend Mrs. Mee, and receiving a series of new revelations with respect to Rosita, each chronicled with an astonishing wealth of detail! Behold, too, Coquellino in a smart yellow gown, giggling convulsively, as she banters young Pereira—whom she secretly adores—but who, for his part, merely tolerates Miss de Castro, because, though not the Rose, she is always near the Rose!

And here comes the Rose herself! Rosita a little late, perfectly turned out, and radiating smiles; no one would suspect from the deportment of Madame Tanzy and her niece, that they had so recently quitted the field of battle! Perhaps the girl looks a little pale, and the expression of her eyes is unaccountably serious, but she walks with a light, springy step, as if the garden were her property.

The previous evening, at a late hour, her Ayah had made certain disclosures to Madame Tanzy! "Tyjee" had heard it all from another Ayah as they squatted together on the bath-room steps, chewing betel nut, expectorating, and exchanging news.

It was the tale of the photograph, and how the six men had played for it, and Vicars had won, and Mrs. Wilson had told Wilson Sahib, who was "bahut kuffa" (very angry) and had gone to talk to Vicars—yes, and to the "Chinna Dori" (station-master) too!

Madame Tanzy *now* comprehended why her wedding-present had been thrown in her face, that is to say, returned by messenger, without even a chit of thanks. Nor was this the worst!

Pilchai-Moothoo-Pillay, the Box-wallah, had called and insisted on interviewing the "Dori Sani" (Tamil for mistress). The Dori Sani nearly had a fit, when he gravely unfolded his business; she was a careful woman, who made one pice do duty for two, with a certain amount of private savings, and her eyes nearly departed from their sockets, as she scanned the long list of items set down in faded brown ink, on very coarse yellow paper.

"Silk and cambric, lace, chocolate, and various notorious French novels—grand total 289 rupees, 11 annas, 3 pice!"

"*Grand Dieu!* How dare you give her credit!" screamed Madame Tanzy, when at last she was able to speak; "how dare you let Missy run this up?—I don't believe she has had half the things you've charged for, you old cheat and robber."

"Oh, yes," he answered imperturbably, "and good bargains. Your Missy plenty clever, and must always have the best—no common things—she telling always, no old box-wallah rubbish! I getting these from my brother in Madras, because the Dori Sani good customer, and always giving plenty recommendation, but now my brother wants the money to pay a soucar, and also Poonasawmy Chetty, who gives materials—telling money must getting soon. My brother never waiting—see, if you please, his letter—if he is not paid—too

much bobbery making—yes, he will come himself to Tani-Kul—a ticket is but one rupee. Terriama? (Do you understand?)"

"But the Missy has no money!" cried Madame Tanzy; "what is the good of coming to me?" she demanded, and her voice was high.

"The Dori Sani will pay," he replied, with an air of comfortable conviction.

"The Dori Sani will never pay—never!" she screamed excitedly, "that is her last word—you were crazy to trust the Missy, and you can pay for it, Pitee Kāran! (fool man). Now go, go, go!"

Thereupon Pilchai-Moothoo-Pillay the hawker rose slowly to his feet, shuffled on his shoes, salaamed, and with impressive deliberation took his departure down the bungalow steps. This dignified exit gave Madame Tanzy a sense of painful uneasiness—it seemed to her that there was something ominous in his demeanour.

When Rosita was confronted with the bill she merely shrugged her shoulders and laughed. But laughing should not now avail her! Her aunt, for once, was thoroughly roused. Money was her fetish, she inherited her reverence for it from her thrifty parents; a horrible fear invaded her. Rosita was under age—was she responsible for her debts? Must her careful savings be swept away to pay for this wicked girl's secret squanderings? Never; she felt inspired by the spirit of a wild animal in danger of losing her one cub.

"And who is going to pay this bill?" she demanded as she flaunted the long strip of paper before her niece's eyes.

"I am sure I don't know!" replied Rosita, with exasperating nonchalance. "Let him wait."

"He won't wait; he says he must have the money within four days—so what then?"

Rosita merely shrugged her shoulders till they almost touched her ears.

"And how dare you run up such a bill, and get all those grand things, you little deceiving devil?"

"But why not get things?" argued Rosita. "Everyone does it—Mrs. Beard owes Pillay five hundred rupees—and she an orphanage girl!"

"Mrs. Beard has a husband; Beard as engine-driver is drawing four hundred a month, and doing overtime in the cotton season—and you have not one pice except what *I* give you!"

"You don't give me much, do you?" rejoined her niece, with a defiant smile.

"And what lies you told about the bangle sent with no name!" Casting up eyes and hands in pious appeal to heaven, Madame Tanzy ejaculated, "Ai yo Sami! Ai yo Sami! What lies! What lies!"

"Everyone tells lies," declared Rosita boldly; "Mrs. Notting tells lies about her family, Alida de Castro tells lies about her age—you also tell lies. You told Mrs. Duke the melons were four annas; and you know you only pay two, so why blame me? At least, I do not *cheat?*"

"Yes, you are a living cheat," cried her aunt furiously. "You cheat the men out of presents, the girls out of their lovers, the hawkers out of their money—you make everyone slave for you for nothing, you cheat! What is that Cranie Coquellino but your dressmaker, and maid? As for the melons," now breathing hard, "they are four annas in Bangalore."

"They are not!" said Rosita, with measured emphasis.

Such flat contradiction naturally precipitated matters, and Madame Tanzy, filled with a sudden access of rage, stood up and gave the table a violent push;

her eyes blazed, her native blood was afire, the accumulated resentment of years was released at last!

"You call *me* a cheat," she panted, "me, to whom you owe your bread?"

Rosita as she stared at her relative, realized that a crisis was imminent. There was about to be a struggle, an immediate and desperate struggle for the upper hand. Hitherto her aunt had been worsted in all disputes, crushed and extinguished; but behold, like a Phœnix, she was rising from her ashes!

"It is true about the melons," repeated the girl, dealing a stout blow, "yes, and the mangoes—and you make a lot on the Mutton Club too. They *all* say so! Pay for me—you can afford it, you have lots of money. And if I am extravagant, it is your fault—you brag to everyone in Tani-Kul, of my taste in dress, of my pretty frocks—how can I dress if I have no money? Would you have me dress in air? Pilchai-Moothoo-Pillay is a rascal, a pig, a chuckler, to come to you behind my back; but since he has come, and you have the bill——" she paused and looked her aunt full in the face, as she added, "you can pay him!"

"Pay him—I! No, but I will pay you, you cherished viper and devil—yes," and Madame Tanzy, with a complete surrender to her fury, made a sudden spring at Rosita, caught her by the neck, and thrust her against the wall, shaking her violently, as she panted:

"Now I will pay you!—yes, now I will pay! I will pay!" She looked crazy, with her loosened hair, lips drawn back, and fiercely-knitted brows.

Then she momentarily released the astonished Rosita from her grasp, and boxed her ears vigorously with loud, resounding slaps. Superior force is a powerful factor in most quarrels—Rosita, dishevelled, humiliated and frightened, as her aunt flung her away, sank limply on to a chair and burst into a storm of hysterical tears.

Meanwhile Madame Tanzy stood over her, exhausted, gasping, and struggling to recover breath and speech.

"Stop whimpering like a gorawallah's brat!" she said savagely, "and listen to me. First of all, I will not pay—not one pice—ever—manage that for yourself, Miss Rosita. Secondly, I have had enough of you! *Il faut que ça finisse!* Either you marry or you go back to the Nuns. Take your choice! I cannot control you—no, and I will not be ashamed. What of the photograph you offered to six men as prize? Do you call that respectable? and when I send a wedding present to Mrs. Wilson, she returns it by bearer. All these insults, are because of *you*. What of the tale I hear, that one night, when I think you are in bed, you get out of your window—and——"

"Never—never!" screamed Rosita, "it is a lie—an Ayah's lie—oh, the devils, they would say anything!"

"Well, soon you can be as bad as you please, for after this cold weather you go to Pondicherry to the Nuns. Tanzy will pay—oh, and lots of women here, would thankfully subscribe money, to be rid of you out of the place. Terriama? do you understand?"

"Never—never will I go back to the Convent," declared Rosita, in a voice shrill with passion.

"Then marry, and be quick about it. There's Simpson—you can have him, his father is in works at Cawnpore, so well off—he will help his son. There is Pereira, a clever boy, he will be telegraph super. yet. There's Cooper, a driver, drawing fine pay—and——"

"Cooper!" broke in Rosita, "he is old, and he is fat. I would sooner die—die—die!"

"Then there's Vernon—he is not old and fat."

Silence. The loud tick of a cheap clock, was the only sound for a whole minute.

"Come—which will it be?" demanded Madame Tanzy, and she stamped her foot. "Which?"

No answer beyond a subdued sniffing and half-stifled sobs.

"Vernon is steady—he has savings—he is a gentleman—so people say—in marrying him, you might draw—a prize."

"Oh, purriwalee! purriwalee! (never mind). Yes, I will marry someone!" agreed Rosita, drying her eyes, and tossing back her hair, "but I cannot decide now," and suddenly reaching over for the hawker's bill, she tore it with vicious deliberation, into small pieces, scattered these over the floor, and then rose and retired into her own room. As there was only a thin purdah between it and the parlour, and desiring absolute seclusion, Rosita shut the high wooden doors separating the two apartments. Circumstances were closing round the Beauty of Tani-Kul. She felt completely shattered, and desired to be alone to think seriously—yes, and to cry. Oh, she could not help it! and though not readily moved to real tears, she now lay prone on her cot, sniffing and sobbing into her handkerchief, the very embodiment of prostration, and defeat.

Who would have supposed, that her aunt was capable of such fury? She had looked fierce, savage and murderous—Rosita still felt the grip of her bony fingers on her neck, and shoulders.

For once the all-conquering enchantress was completely cowed! She seemed to have lost her boldness and self-confidence; between Madame Tanzy's vigorous hands, and Mrs. Coffey's stabbing tongue, her serenity had been destroyed.

And to think of her aunt, hearing of her getting out through the window! only just for a little talk with poor Roberts, who had pleaded *so* hard. Someone had been skulking about; the Chokedar no doubt—old devil! As for Pondicherry—no, never again,

would she set foot in the dusty, half asleep old place, that withered imitation of France; and how could she exist under the roof of one who had become like a raging lunatic, whose ears were open to Bazaar tales —and whose purse was closed to her?

Well, she must plan something, and as Rosita lay extended on her cot, her active mind surveyed and weighed many matters, and she critically considered each of her suitors, passing them in review before her shrewd mental vision. Finally the choice lay between Booth and Vernon. She liked Booth best—oh, so much the best; if it were a matter of mere inclination, naturally it would be Charlie Booth. He had such eloquent blue eyes, he was so big and tall, and Vernon was barely of middle height—he also understood the "*joie de vivre*"—he enjoyed his life—but he was lazy, reckless, poor, too slack and easy-going, to please his superiors. Long she lay meditating, and vainly endeavouring to arrive at some definite decision, but her thoughts were beyond her control, her mind was swayed to and fro like a branch in the wind. Now it was Vernon, again it was Booth—finally she resolved to cut the cards, and leave the verdict to Chance!

Rising languidly from her couch, she sought for, and found, an extremely greasy little pack, chiefly used for fortune-telling. These she shuffled, with a solemn face, as she stood at her untidy toilet table, inwardly vowing that this should decide—she would abide by her fate. Red for Booth, black for Vernon. Then she piously crossed herself, and cut the pack; her hand shook a little as she turned up a card—it proved to be the Ace of Clubs.

Rosita suddenly raised her eyes, and surveyed herself in the glass; her face was sallow, her eyes were red, there were great dark patches under them, and her hair was hanging about her ears—why, she looked

positively ugly! Vernon—well—he was steady, sure to get a rise, crazy about her in his quiet way, and she could turn him round her little finger—that would be one advantage. He had savings; of course he would be promoted—yes, and he should take her away from Tani-Kul, perhaps to Madras! What a piece of good fortune, amidst so much bad luck, that she had written him a line, and bestowed her photograph! Yes, she would settle it all to-day, and be even with her aunt, that devil Pilchai-Moothoo-Pillay, and the Ayah. It was already half-past three, if she was to meet Vernon she must dress at once. Stimulated by this necessity, she put her head into the back verandah and commanded the "boy," who was leisurely sorting vegetables, to bring her a strong cup of coffee, then she proceeded to bathe, powder her face, arrange her hair, and make an unusually careful toilette. Rosita had the gift of knowing how to put on her clothes. When she was equipped, she went into the sitting-room, looking as fresh and delightful as a summer dawn. Here she found Madame Tanzy, also dressed for a promenade—it was Saturday, the At Home day at the bandstand. Aunt and niece exchanged one fierce, sharp look, and without uttering a word, set forth together for the Public Gardens.

CHAPTER XIII

It is scarcely necessary to mention, that Vernon had long been awaiting Rosita; indeed, to be exact, he had arrived at the empty Gardens a little after three o'clock, wearing his best suit, and a bran new collar and tie. Rosita was as difficult to catch as a sunbeam—but now—she was his—his own! Exhilarated by this knowledge, he trod on air. As he paced the walks, his

head was full of happy plans; he would see Sharratt without delay, and if there was definite promise of promotion, he and Rosita need not wait.

A little bungalow with a bit of garden, a piano—he would pick one up at an auction in Madras—a cart and pony perhaps—why not? If he had two hundred rupees a month? and Rosita was bound to be a capital manager, she always looked so neat and dainty. (He should have seen Rosita's room!) He would, of course, be moved to another station—perhaps to Podanur or Bangalore. Possibly it might be a little awkward if they remained on at Tani-Kul, where Rosita had won so many hearts. Poor Charlie Booth! he was sincerely sorry for him, but he would never have made a satisfactory husband—he was too extravagant, harum-scarum, and feather-brained.

By the time that Vernon had finished building his castles in the air, and there installed Rosita, the Gardens were fairly full; the happy lover had declined tennis, badminton, and even an invitation to supper, had cleverly eluded friends, and waved off a swarm of small playfellows. Ah! here came Rosita at last. She turned to him eagerly, whilst Miss Mills engaged her aunt in conversation, and began an excited narrative with regard to the enormities of her cook in connection with ghee.

"Have you been waiting?" she inquired, as she raised her glorious eyes to his.

"About—about—an hour," he stammered.

"You see I've kept my word, and I have paid you, have I not?" beginning to move on.

"You have indeed—a million times over."

"Oh, don't let us go that walk," she protested impatiently, "we shall meet all the Wilsons—and a whole crowd—and I do so want to talk to you *alone*."

"Not much chance of that here!" he said, looking

round in despair. There was not one secluded spot, much less a summer-house, all was bare and flat, open to the heavens, and thronged with acquaintances.

"Then let us go into the Institute," suggested the young lady. "The reading-room is cool, and we shall have it to ourselves—as this is not mail day."

"All right," he agreed; "how clever of you to think of it," and they walked away.

"Just look at that girl!" said Mrs. Sharratt, pointing to Rosita with her fan. "Last week Vicars—yesterday Booth—to day Vernon. See, she is carrying him off."

"One would think you were talking of a wolf and a lamb," expostulated Miss Mills, who rather admired the culprit. "All the young men want to carry off Rosita."

"Whoever does, will find that, whatever Rosita is, she is not a lamb."

"After all, if she *is* frisky, she is young," urged Miss Mills; "we have been that ourselves—have we not?"

"Yes, but when I was a girl, *I* never had half a dozen young men ready to cut one another's throats about *me*," declared Mrs. Sharratt, vainly endeavouring to elongate a short-fat neck.

"Ah, no," assented her companion, "I daresay not. But then, you see, Rosita is a *beauty!*"

Mrs. Sharratt reddened, swallowed, and was silent. She would have liked to argue the matter, and proclaim her former attractions—but pride sealed her lips.

The verandah of the Institute opened directly into the Gardens; Rosita, followed by Vernon, passed through this and entered the large cool reading-room where was a huge centre table covered with papers and magazines, and surrounded by cane arm-chairs.

Rosita immediately sank into one of these, and having produced a pocket fan, said:

"So we are good friends, are we not?"

Vernon, who had removed his straw hat, now leant his elbows on the table, and gazed at her interrogatively.

"More than friends, I hope, Rosita?"

"And you love me, very, very much?"

"Why you know that. The question is—how much do you care for *me?*"

"Ah," with a tantalizing laugh, "I cannot tell you! but I love you—to love me—and——at least I gave you my photograph."

"And yourself?" suddenly laying his hand on her arm. "Come, Rosita, you have kept me in suspense long enough—is it really Yes—or No?"

"*Mais cela dépend!* but I think it will be—yes."

"You think only—I must be sure."

"Some day you shall be sure!" Rosita's irresistible eyes looked full into his; her lips quivered with mirth—she was a vivid incarnation of the French definition of a flirt, and the attitude—"*S'offrir sans se donner!*" was as second nature to Mademoiselle Fontaine. "But, first, tell me, a little of your life—your past."

"What can I tell you that you wish to know? I am twenty-six, I have been four years on the line, I am to be promoted soon——"

"Ah, yes, yes," assented the lady, with a touch of petulance, she was armed with a determination to force from him some revelations. "We all know that; but before you came on the line—before you came to India. Tell me about yourself then—where were you born?"

"In London—in Park Lane."

"In a lane!" and her voice expressed sincere disappointment. "Your people—are they alive?"

"Some are," was his vague response.

"*Mais voyons! voyons!* get on, dear boy!" The girl's wits were alert—her tone persuasive. "Tell me some more—tell me of your family—*enfin* your history. I must know all about you—now."

"Well, I went to school like other boys——"

"Oh, yes, they say you are well-educated. Is it true," she paused, "that your name is not really Vernon?"

"Yes, it is true," and he looked at her gravely.

"*Ciel!* and what is your name?"

Silence.

"But what have you done?" she demanded, opening her eyes to their fullest extent. "Everyone says you are so steady."

"I have done nothing that I am ashamed of."

"Then why change your name? That is not good. If I marry you, I must know your real name."

"Of course—it will be yours."

"And you will tell it to me this instant," she urged in the softest voice imaginable.

"Yes, if you will keep it a secret?"

She nodded. "Oh, I can keep dozens of secrets. You would not believe all the secrets that I know!"

"Well then, my official name is John Herbrand Patrick Vernon Sacheverell-Talbot—an awful handicap for a goods guard."

"*Mon Dieu! quel drôle de nom!* and would I have all these names?"

"You would be Mrs. Sacheverell-Talbot with a hyphen if you liked, but I think we would drop the Sacheverell."

"It is hideous! Now you have told me that, you will tell me more." She must wring his secret from him at all costs. "You will tell me why you are Vernon, why you are here in India, away from all your friends —you will tell me all your secrets."

"It is not altogether my secret," he hesitated.

"Still you will share it only with me?" she pleaded, and Rosita leant a little nearer to him, her sweet breath was on his cheek, the famed perfumed breath peculiar to a half-caste girl. This was more than flesh and

blood could stand! Moved out of his self-possession by the soft intentness of her eyes, and her delicious smile, Vernon was about to speak, when a faint rustling movement caused him to look up, and he beheld someone in white standing in the doorway. It was only Mrs. Holland come in search of a magazine, yet he became instinctively conscious of a rigidity that had taken possession of her whole figure, as she glanced at the couple so intensely absorbed in one another Rosita's beautiful face wore the expression of a Delilah, with her eager gaze, her parted lips, and she alas, was powerless to stand between her *protégé* and temptation; she saw the unhappy young man being drawn helplessly into the meshes of the cruel enchantress, and doomed. With an impatient sigh, Mrs. Holland turned away; but her momentary presence, her glance, had somehow broken the spell, and recalled Vernon to himself, and his senses.

He had never had much intercourse with young women. Where they were concerned, he was still a mere inexperienced youth, timid, modest, self-distrustful, although in other matters he was daring, self-confident, and older than his actual years. He drew back a little; it was true, that he adored the lovely face and melting eyes gazing up into his—but all he had to offer her was his present position—why drag into it a past that was done with, and days that were dead? Time enough to confide in Rosita when she was his wife! One thing he could offer her, and that a stainless character. He would certainly resume his own name, he would make his home in India. But for the present, even Rosita should not force his confidence. Nor did she, though she exhausted every artifice; she even used threats and tears, but he still remained immovable, a slight streak of stubbornness in his character stood by him nobly now.

"Rosita, you must take me as I am," he repeated, "just a common working guard! I give you my word of honour, that there is nothing against me in England. I am no criminal; I am simply a dull young man of good birth, who has been unfortunate—now are you satisfied?"

"*Non!* I wish to be the wife of a gentleman!"

"You can be that, I hope."

"Yes, but one whose family will be as good as mine. I am one of the de Lignes, you know."

Vernon was aware that her father had been an underclerk in a wine-merchant's office in Pondicherry, her mother the sister of Madame Tanzy.

Finding that he continued obdurate, she became injured, and pathetic, and tearful.

"After all, Rosita, it would make no difference to you who or what I was in England. It is a question of who, or what I am, here—here, you shall have everything I can get, or do to please you. We will have a nice little bungalow, perhaps a pony and cart——"

"And my dresses out from home?" she broke in.

"I am afraid I could never run to that; however, I will do my best. May I speak to Sharratt to-day—and Madame Tanzy?"

"Not my aunt, I would rather break the news to her first, please. And now you have been so very unkind, I want you to do something to make up," and she stroked his sleeve gently.

"I do not mean to be unkind—how could I ever be unkind to *you?* And surely you know, I will do anything to please you."

"You will!" drawing in her breath, "anything?"

"Why of course—how can you doubt me?"

For a moment she gazed at him with eyes softly suffused, and suddenly laying her hand on his, she said:

"Then lend me three hundred rupees?"

The request came not merely as a surprise, it was distinctly in the nature of a shock, but Vernon was master of his countenance.

"Certainly," he answered, with admirable self-possession, "when do you want it?"

"At once—oh, you kind, good fellow! It is not for myself—no, do you think I would ask for it? But for a great friend of mine—poor girl—my greatest friend. She is in awful trouble, with no one to help her, and if she does not find this money to pay her debts, she will be disgraced, and says she will take poison."

"I will arrange about it to-morrow. After all, it will come out of the fund for setting up our house."

"Our house"—delightful words!

"Oh, but one day she will pay, I will see to that myself. How generous and good you are to me—oh, you are a dear, *dear* boy."

"I will get the cheque cashed in Madras, and post the money to you in notes registered. I am going there on Monday—will it be time enough?—will that answer?"

"Yes, yes, yes." Then moved by an irresistible impulse she drew his face toward hers, "You kind, noble, generous—best of *all*," and her exquisite mouth, suddenly brushed his cheek.

Vernon actually blushed like a girl—the stupid young man, instead of returning the kiss with interest, merely pressed his lips upon her hand.

How handsome he was! thought Rosita, as she looked at his bent profile and his well-shaped head. Why could she not care for him as she did for Booth? Why? Why? Why? Meanwhile she had three hundred rupees, and could now snap her fingers at Moothoo-Pillay, and her devilish aunt.

"And when shall we be married?" he asked.

"Oh, not yet—oh, not for ages; why I am only just eighteen—I want a little time to play—I want——"

The people from the Gardens were now beginning to straggle in. Among the first to enter was Jessie Sharratt.

"Fancy you two being here!" she exclaimed, "looking at papers four days old! Well, you are funny! There have been such splendid sets at badminton, such rallies, you were silly to have missed the match. Oh, here is father—what can he want at this hour?"

It was soon evident that he wanted Vernon.

"Hullo—I've been looking for you all over the place," and he held up a telegram. "Grant has met with an accident, and been taken to the General Hospital in Madras, and they want to borrow a guard, so I'm sending you off by the 6.30. I am sorry, but it can't be helped. Get your traps, there's a good fellow. I expect I shall have to spare you for a couple of weeks."

This sudden move was an unexpected blow, dealt at a most inconvenient moment; however, there was nothing for it, but to submit and start. Vernon secured a few precious moments with his lady-love, and the promise of many letters, then he hurried off to collect his kit.

The promised three hundred rupees were faithfully dispatched registered to Rosita, who paid Pilchai-Moothoo-Pillay and loaded him with reproaches and abuse. She little heeded the long toilsome hours of Vernon's extra time, that these rupees represented, as she counted out the money with her tiny claw-like hands, but she did not fail to send her *fiancé* a note full of praise, endearments and thanks; indeed she proved a capital correspondent, though most of her letters contained a little commission in Madras. Something

for the theatricals, a few pairs of gloves, scent, handkerchiefs, and Vernon, only too proud to be of service, dispatched all orders, carriage paid.

It must not be supposed, that a head guard's time could be squandered in buying commissions, playing tennis, schooling horses, or even in shopping and making love! Vernon had ample employment, and many so-called "rounds." When on these rounds, he slept at barracks provided by the Company at different points for the running guards; the usual run is about one hundred miles—if required to take the train beyond the limit, the guard gets extra pay. In this way Vernon had earned some of the money, which had passed over so easily to Pillay the Hawker. His run at present was between Madras and Jolapett, the Junction for Bangalore and the Neilgherries, and here on one occasion, he had an unpleasant altercation with an Englishman who was travelling with two large Persian greyhounds in a first-class compartment. The M. R. C. is liberal, but really two dogs—dogs without tickets! They looked decidedly fierce with their long, black muzzles, and hairy ears. A timid traveller had protested, and nervously drawn the guard's attention to these first-class passengers, and the guard had ordered them out, but their master had flatly refused to suffer them to be removed.

"If you want them out, take them!" he blustered. "Mind you, if they bite, *I* am not responsible."

It is needless to mention that no porter at Jolapett Junction would approach these monsters, who stood up on the seat with lolling tongues, whilst their owner smoked and laughed and set rules and regulations at defiance. He was a little man with a shiny red face and shiny black hair, and in spite of Vernon's polite request, maintained an insolent inactivity.

"Why the devil should you bother *me*," he demanded.

"The other guards made no row—here," and he offered a rupee. "Oh, so you won't, eh? You may be precious glad of it yet. Well, I'll not stir a finger—I'm not going to be parted from my two valuable dogs, and have them stuffed into your filthy dog-boxes—that may have been carrying jackals for all *I* know!"

"The dogs can go in the van," urged Vernon.

"No, by Jove, they won't go in the van—no, not even in your aristocratic company."

"Look sharp, sir, please—the train is due to start."

"All right—I snap my fingers at you, guard. Here they are—here they stay."

"No, they don't—not this time!" said Vernon, suddenly climbing into the carriage, and seizing both the dogs by their collars he dragged them bodily forth.

The pair were so completely taken by surprise, that they made no resistance, and as he stood, a little breathless, on the platform, with a hound on either hand, the train began to move, and Vernon could not resist a most unofficial bow to the distracted red-faced individual who was leaning forth and gesticulating from a fast receding carriage window, shouting at the top of his voice:

"I'll report you in Bangalore—upon my soul I will! I'll report you—I'll *smash* you!" The last words were carried away by a little wandering wind and dispersed over the indifferent paddy-fields.

Subsequently the two priceless Persian greyhounds were given water and tied up in a go-down, by order of the station-master, who warmly complimented Vernon on his valour.

"I'll see to the dogs—and their tickets," he declared. "I'll wire to Bangalore that they have been left here till called for—they will go up in the van—or my name is not Robinson."

CHAPTER XIV

Two weeks had slipped into three, and Grant's convalescence proved painfully tedious to another, as well as to himself.

The theatricals at Tani-Kul were now imminent; and "Mr. John Vernon," who had been cast for the part of secondary lover, as well as chief scene-shifter, was "unavoidably absent," *vide* certain gorgeous posters placarded on the railway bookstall. Nevertheless, he managed to obtain thirty-six hours' leave, and rushed up by the express, arriving at the station half an hour before the doors of the Institute were thrown open. He had barely time to have a brush and a wash, to receive Mrs. Coffey's enthusiastic welcome, and then he hurried over to the theatre, and into the so-called green room, thirsting for a sight of his Rosita. But Rosita was not "on" in the first piece, she was responsible for a song and a dance of her own composition, and had not yet arrived. Here, however, was Madame Tanzy, manager, dresser, prompter, and call boy, desperately busy; in one hand she held a pot of grease, in the other a wig, as she hailed Vernon with unfeigned satisfaction.

"Welcome back! You must come and have a bit of supper with us," she said, with unusual hospitality; "we shall be glad to see you. I've been driven mad over this play, *Two is Company*, trying like a fool to please everyone, Booth wanting a part to show his legs, Mrs. Beard wanting to show her white neck, Alida wanting to wear her Sunday hat—I declare between them they have nearly killed me, with all the worry and 'Dick'—but it will go well. I want you to give me a help with

the scene shifting in the last piece; so when Rosita's dance is over—mind—I'll expect you. Tubbs is such a botch, and Luke, though willing, has arms like cotton wool."

"You may depend on me—but I say, Madame Tanzy, has Rosita said anything to you——" he hesitated, "—anything special?" he added, with abrupt significance.

"Oh, yes—Rosita says special things—sometimes," she answered dryly; "but as far as I can remember—nothing about *you*."

Vernon's face fell; the quick-witted matron, noticed the change, and added good-naturedly:

"Well, well, never mind now! We will talk it all over to-night after supper. Rosita is at home dressing herself—won't she be surprised to see you?"

"No, I believe she expects me."

"Oh, all right, go round when the curtain is up—and just tell me how things look—I've got Mrs. Beard's sofa, and Miss Mills's chairs, and Mrs. Holland's piano—as for the actors, I'm sure you will think Booth good—he does play the lover to the life! There, there's Alida calling!" as she caught sight of a half-naked figure gesticulating at a door hard by, "I must go."

Vernon found himself a seat far back among the eight-anna places, and prepared to enjoy and criticize the new play. It proved to be surprisingly well-mounted, capitally acted by Booth, Jessie Sharratt, Fanny Wilson and Holland (yes, Holland played the heavy father like a first-rate professional). Vernon clapped till his hands were sore, a wave of *esprit de corps* surged up in his breast. He was sincerely proud of Tani-Kul. At the conclusion of the piece the actors were summoned before the curtain, shouted at, acclaimed and apostrophized by name. Then the band played by desire selections from the *Geisha*, and there succeeded a rather tedious wait.

By and by the audience began to shuffle, cough, and finally to stamp their feet, and at the very last moment, Rosita ran up the steps, dashed past Vernon, flung aside her cloak, and bounded lightly on the stage.

She wore a short full-skirted dress of rose-coloured gauze, spangled with silver; black stockings and shoes flattered the exquisite symmetry of her feet and ankles; a piece of black velvet encircled her throat, and in her hand was a large black fan—ever with her a most deadly weapon. The costume, a triumph, was the handiwork of her slave Coquellino.

Rosita looking lovely, and calmly self-confident, was accorded an uproarious ovation. She kissed her hand coquettishly, and her lips parted in a smile as the music struck up a few preliminary bars.

"Ninon, Ninon, que fais-tu de la vie?"

she began in a sweet, penetrating voice, her head slightly to one side, her figure poised, the question in her eloquent eyes.

"L'heure s'enfuit, le jour succède au jour.
Rose ce soir, demain flétrie.
Comment vis-tu, toi qui n'as pas d'amour?"

The singer paused expressively and glanced around with a dramatic gesture, suitable to the question. Mademoiselle Fontaine, a born actress, was breathing, so to speak, her native air—whilst all Tani-Kul hung upon her lips.

"Aujourd'hui le printemps, Ninon, demain l'hiver,
Quoi! tu n'as pas d'étoile, et tu vas sur la mer!
Au combat sans musique, en voyage sans livre!
Quoi! tu n'as pas d'amour, et tu parles de vivre!
Moi, pour un peu d'amour, je donnerais mes jours,
Et je les donnerais pour rien sans les amours.
Qu'importe que le jour finisse et recommence,
Quand d'une autre existence le cœur est animé?
Ouvres-vous, jeunes fleurs. Si la mort vous enlève,
La vie est un sommeil, l'amour en est le rêve,
Et vous aurez vécu, si vous avez aimé."

Every syllable was given with crisp distinctness and delicate precision; even those who understood but few words of French, caught the drift of the song; for the sparkling eyes and emphatic gestures of the singer, eloquently interpreted the lines of Alfred de Musset.

The siren threw her soul into the words, and sang with an abandon and a passionate challenge that swept the most prosaic off their balance; her song meant "Have a good time now—never be afraid of letting yourself go. Love—Love, and Love only is lord of all."

As the last notes died upon the air, and Rosita confronted her audience breathless, and seductive, she might have represented the original of the poet's inspiration.

Mrs. Holland alone looked with cold and unsympathetic gaze at the graceful vision—this alluring enchantress with the emotional eyes, gestures and voice, who was tempting all these hard-handed, hard-working men and common-place young women—to—what? "To lose the world for love." And Vernon, seated in the background, unnoticed and aloof, felt dazzled, confounded, bewitched, and—oh, how his heart beat! It seemed to be somewhere in the back of his throat. For he was prepared to swear that the siren had caught sight of him, had sung this song to him, and to him alone. Poor fellow!

After a momentary pause, and an outbreak of rapturous applause, the band struck up a lively air, and Rosita began to dance. How could any living creature be so supple in her movements, so delicately light of foot? She seemed to be blown and wafted about the stage, and flitted to and fro as if her spirit was in her feet; with curving arms and languorous eyes she executed a wonderful *pas seul* of her own invention, alike passionate, and seductive.

At first the measure was slow and stately—a mere swaying of waving arms and gracefully-poised figure—surely in those swaying, undulating movements there was a vague reminiscence of the East? Were not one or two of those voluptuous and enticing attitudes in nearer affinity to the postures of a Temple Nautch girl? Well, well! "Where ignorance is bliss 'tis folly to be wise." "*Honi soit qui mal y pense!*" Tani-Kul the simple, the uninitiated, saw, in the alluring performance, nothing to criticize. Even Mrs. Sharratt, planted in a prominent seat, was unconscious of any additional reason for disapproval: but some of the Bazaar folks in the one-anna places at the back, muttered to one another, and grunted, and grinned, with horrible significance. Gradually the movement became faster and yet faster, till Rosita whirled about the boards, tireless, maddening, enchanting and triumphant. By degrees the circles became slower, and finally the brilliant performance flickered down, down to a profound and deliberate curtsy. On this occasion the danseuse had surpassed herself! Here indeed was the poetry of motion, exhibited with extraordinary subtlety and expression; momentarily carried away, most of her audience sprang to their feet and shouted:

"Oh, well done, Rosita, well done! Encore, encore, encore!" whilst the back seats hummed like a human hive.

But the panting beauty, with all the airs of a spoiled prima-donna, merely smiled graciously, kissed her hand in the most approved manner, and the curtain fell to yells of applause. Vernon's chance had come at last, he seized his cap and slipped out; he felt his head swimming, and the words:

"Moi, pour un peu d'amour, je donnerais mes jours,"

were ringing in his ears. In another second he and

Rosita would meet—yes, he was determined that he would go to Sharratt and ask him to find another guard for the Madras job—he and Rosita should *never* again be parted!

He ran round to the side door and pushed his way into the wings; the stage was being prepared for the last item on the playbill, the actors were dressing—but where was Rosita? She knew that he was present! (No, his letter, which had arrived the previous night, had been tossed aside unopened, the lady was much too busy to read it.) As to where she was?—Vernon suddenly turned the corner of a screen and discovered his *fiancée;* she was standing with her back to him, her arms locked round the neck of Charlie Booth. Something in her lover's expression caused her to turn, and there—oh horror! was Vernon—the *fâcheux troisième*—whom she believed to be one hundred and fifty miles away! The situation was the most embarrassing the subtle little hypocrite had ever been compelled to face. Well, there was nothing to be said, she must just "stick it out"—she had always liked blue-eyed old Charlie, and Vernon had gone away—and—and—and—oh, ever so many ands!

Vernon became ghastly white, but did not utter a word, he merely stared at the couple in paralyzed silence; at Booth, painted, bewigged, and Rosita, the captivating rose-skirted dancer; under the circumstances, his self-command was almost superhuman.

"Why, you look as if we were a bad railway accident!" said Booth, with forced facetiousness; then as he met the anguish and struggle of his look; "what's up, old boy?"

Rosita laughed. She knew.

"It is, as you see," and she nodded at her victim. "I—could not help it—*Non, c'est plus fort que moi!*"

"And I say, old man," resumed Booth, "since

you've surprised our little secret—you will keep it dark—won't you?"

Vernon dared not trust his voice to reply; he nodded briefly, turned away, and fled down the steps.

"Hullo, what's happened? Why has he got the hump, eh! Rosita—what have you been up to?"

"Only one day before he went to Madras—he asked me to marry him—and I said yes."

"The devil you did!"

"Yes, but I changed my mind—so good for *you*," her eyes flashed and melted, "you need not *gronder* me, need you?"

"No, my star of the heavens, my angel—but it's a bit rough on poor old Vernon, isn't it? He's such a rattling good chap, and my best friend. Great Scott, there goes the curtain, I'm off!"

Meanwhile Vernon, who was still mentally stunned, stood outside bare-headed in the cool starlit night. In his short life he had received some crushing blows; the death of his parents had overwhelmed him; his uncle's unreasonable cruelty had hurt him sorely, and practically ruined his prospects—but *this*—the last—so entirely unexpected, was more terrible than any. His dazed brain realized that he had lost Rosita, all future happiness, and faith. That she, who was to have been his consoler, his good angel, had dealt him a mortal wound.

With a stupefied expression he gazed at the illuminated Institute. He could still hear the buzz of voices, the tuning of the band; then he looked over towards the station, with its great semaphores and lights, and turned thither from the mere force of habit; his mind was momentarily stunned; his thoughts were not yet coherent, but instinct prompted him to one step. As he hastened towards the well-known terminus, he decided to abandon Tani-Kul for ever! It was now eleven o'clock, and as he

passed outside the goods shed, Vernon distinguished the figure of a man and a dog, Gojar and Tom; he did not halt for a second, but ran on to the platform, and caught a luggage train on the point of starting. With the agility of habit he flung himself into an empty truck, and travelled back to Madras, with envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness for his companions.

Gojar had witnessed the young fellow's flurried dash at the first truck that came—a faint rumour of Rosita's doings had reached his ears—is not everything, bad and good, known in the Bazaar?

"Ah ha!" he said, turning to address the dog, "so there is something in the ring after all, and I have got my wish!"

CHAPTER XV

THE sensations of Vernon as he travelled southward in the open truck, that cool, starry night, would be impossible to describe.

So the dream was ended, he had awakened to chill, penetrating daylight—a light in which stood revealed the real Rosita, a heartless coquette, a girl of moods and changes, an artist in emotions, who enjoyed playing scenes in real life for her own amusement; even now, was she not acting a part? No, instinctively he felt that here was something different, her heart was in this rôle. Rosita had been acting with Simpson, Pereira and himself; with wretched young White, who had enlisted in his despair; but with respect to Charlie Booth she was temporarily in earnest.

He beheld his idol as she was; false, cynical, coldly selfish, and yet, in spite of everything, he still adored her. Then memory began to work more freely to its own torment. The spell of her beauty, her bewitching

air, her haunting eyes and vibrating voice—held Vernon in its grip. Before his vision arose a gliding figure, in gauzy skirts, the glancing feet, the dazzling smile; in his ears rang the siren's song, and the words:

"Comment vis-tu, toi qui n'as pas d'amour?"

Nor was he singular in his infatuation; had she not turned the heads of half the men in Tani-Kul? As she ceased her seductive song and dance, had not the enthusiastic house risen *en masse* and acclaimed her!—even the most rugged and phlegmatic of her audience, had clapped and stamped and shouted themselves hoarse. At least, he had the consolation of knowing that his devotion and admiration had solid justification. He had loved Rosita almost unconsciously for a long time; for many months his thoughts had been, "How would Rosita like this?" "What would Rosita say to that?" "When would he next see her?" His heart had sprung to life; he received his first personal consciousness of woman's beauty, the day when Rosita, with her hair still in a long plait, had smiled at him, and offered him a rose! And now his love was thrown on his hands, a species of returned empty. Rosita had no use for it—nor had he. What had he to look forward to?—nothing beyond the monthly pay-day! The future was hopeless; appalling to contemplate; a passion of despair assailed him; until to-day there had been something ahead, a dazzling something to fix his eyes on, something that made him insensible to hard work, the miseries of sweltering days, the dull monotony of his existence. But the star of his life had suddenly been quenched, and he sat in outer darkness, a prey to the greatest agony that had ever possessed him. Even if he were offered promotion, what was the good of it now? All his ideals and aspirations had fled.

His blood felt on fire, his head was burning, something in his temples seemed to throb, throb, throb, with the recurrent force of a mechanical engine.

As Vernon sat on a packing-case, with his elbows resting on his knees, his head on his hand, his haggard eyes surveyed the scene bathed in brilliant moonlight; here were the landmarks so hatefully familiar, landmarks he had passed with a light heart but a few hours previously. Well, there was a yawning gulf between then and now! The calm beauty of the night had no effect on him, he was enveloped in a cloud of black despair. Truly he had come to the "bad bit of road" to which Gojar had alluded. What was to be gained by proceeding? why should he not, as others had done, "fall out by the way?"

And Charlie Booth, whom he had commiserated!—here he burst into a harsh laugh—Booth, his chief friend. In some respects, he and Rosita would match; at least, they would agree in play hours; they were fond of pleasure, excitement and change—equally careless of money, risks and responsibility. As for him, he would never return to Tani-Kul—how could he face it? It was true that his brief engagement remained unsuspected, known only to the "happy couple," and it was a curious coincidence, that he alone had been called upon to share their secret!

All night long, as the train lumbered onward, he sat with his burning head resting on his hands, brooding and wretched. His whole body was throbbing, shaken by a strange force, his face was damp with sweat. A few stragglers at stations, or hooded herds, guarding their flocks, wondered to see the solitary figure of a European in an open truck, so plainly visible in the radiant moonlight; a criminal? or mad? Vernon's thoughts were wild, confused, and evil. What, they urged, was the good of keeping straight? Why sh uld

he not take his fling like others—one is young but once! *Aujourd'hui le printemps—demain l'hiver.*

Hitherto, certain blind inherited scruples and a pair of dark grey eyes—his mother's—had arisen between him, and degrading dissipations. He had been frequently compelled to listen to the weird tales and experiences of Booth and Pereira, and heard with reluctance, embarrassment and disgust, lurid descriptions of "Blacktown night entertainments" and "Contes Drolatiques" of the Bazaars.

He had received not a few unsought confidences, alluring invitations, and ribald jeers with inflexible self-possession; but now a hot whisper asked, why should he not also plunge into the mad whirlpool and draw forth, and enjoy, a certain amount of so-called pleasure? *Who* cared what became of him? He looked up at the cold stars. Was there a Heaven—a God? If so, did not God hate him?

By and by came the silvery calm of dawn; the thrill of the new day had its influence on Vernon, the storm of his emotions abated; sunlight dispersed the evil crowd, and the spirit of their victim effected its escape.

Nine o'clock had struck, and the sun was high in the heavens when the goods crawled into Salt Cotaurs, and the traveller, stiff and drowsy, went off at once to barracks.

"Hullo, back already!" cried a brother guard. "Why, I thought you got thirty-six hours, to see some blessed tamasha or show?"

"I've seen the blessed show!" he answered with a grim smile, "and here I am, nearly dead with sleep and thirst!"

"But the mail is not due for another hour! how the dickens did you get back—by balloon?"

"No, by a goods.'

"Great Scott, you *were* in a hurry! I say, old man,

you might tell me the lady's name?—is she in Vepery or the Fort?"

But Vernon had already disappeared in search of tea and a tub; he spent most of the day—his holiday—stretched on his cot, in the profound slumber of bodily exhaustion; sleep revived him, and at sundown he woke refreshed; his guardian angel had achieved a victory—the evil little whispers which invaded him were driven back to their parent the Devil. Lying on his charpoy, his eyes fixed on the ceiling, a pipe between his teeth, he evolved fresh plans, resolved to apply for a permanent billet at Madras Central Station, and by and by to take leave to the hills. Daring wishes hovered round the word "Home," but these were promptly stifled. The brake van was his home! For some weeks Vernon journeyed up and down the line, doing his duty with mechanical regularity, and to see the cool, self-possessed guard sitting or standing in his van, who would suppose, that to him, the wheels as they revolved, were ever saying, "Rosita! Rosita! Rosita!"

Her fame still lingered in a certain section of Vepery society, also in barracks, and Vernon was an involuntary listener to her praises, loudly chanted by a clerk in Binney's house, who happened to be visiting a comrade.

"Had the railway folk ever heard of a certain Miss Rosita Fontaine up at Tani-Kul!" he enquired. "Now there was a screamer for you! Small and dark, with splendid eyes—she had driven old Lopez clean off his chump, and kicked up an infernal bobbery at the boarding-house."

"I know her—half French—half Tamil," said a guard; "yes, a most fascinating little devil! I saw her at the railway ball—she got six pair of gloves out of me—she's always on the make."

"She is," agreed a listener; "takes all that comes in her way—hats and hearts—no damned nonsense about *her*—drove home from the Luz fireworks with Taffy Smith in his gharry—he told me so himself."

"Oh, did he?" said the young man from Binney's with withering emphasis, "then Taffy is a liar, as well as a thief—she came back with Dobson and me."

"Well, at any rate, she got a pair of earrings out of Taff, I can swear to that," argued the guard; "she's a scorcher—I never saw a prettier foot, or a pair of more destructive eyes—but she is not the class of girl one would want to take home—I wouldn't *marry* her, no, not if she had ten lakhs!"

The man who would have married her, penniless, had during this conversation twice endeavoured to get out of his seat at the dinner-table, where they were rather closely packed; the last effort being violent, proved successful, and as he struggled forth and walked into the verandah, a neighbour remarked with a grin and jerk of his hand:

"Danger signal—red light! Go easy over the points! That chap Vernon comes from Tani-Kul, where by all accounts they are *mad* about her; most of the bachelors carry an engagement ring in their pockets, ready to hand out! Vernon is a smart, good-looking chap, and I'll bet anything you like, that he is one of the victims."

A random shot, which hit the mark. For one choking moment of indignation, Vernon had felt an impulse to stand forth, and proclaim himself Rosita's champion! but prudence restrained him. Why should he quarrel with all these fellows on behalf of another man's sweetheart? and no doubt their stories were founded on fact—Rosita levied tribute on all her subjects.

The hot, interminable days lagged on; also the stifling tropical nights, with the "zizz, zizz, zizz"

of hungry poisonous insects—yet people talked of the glamour of the East!—then, suddenly Vernon was summoned to Tani-Kul by telegram. It was official, and go he must. As soon as he presented himself in the station-master's office, Sharratt came beaming towards him, with an outstretched hand, his beard grasped in the other.

"I wanted to tell you myself," announced this kind soul, "and I know you'd rather hear the news on the spot, instead of getting it in a letter—you are to be promoted next move to an assistant station-master—your trip as guard on the annual inspection train brought you to notice. Meanwhile you return here as mail guard, and draw two hundred a month, and you deserve it—we are all glad."

So Tani-Kul was his fate!

"Thank you, sir," muttered Vernon; "you are very kind."

It struck Sharratt, with a sense of disappointment, that there was no elation in the young man's air, and that he looked white, wasted, and depressed.

"As you came straight to the office, you have not heard our latest intelligence, eh? I have another fine piece of news for you," continued Sharratt in his cheeriest voice. "The beautiful Rosita has made up her mind at last—and is going to marry Booth."

"Oh, so it has been given out?"

"Why, of course! Booth could never keep a secret—much less such a fine one as *that*—it is a foolish match for both of them, but young people will have their own way. Well, Vernon, I am really pleased you've got a rise—I expect you will take over your new duties here at once. I can't say that Madras has agreed with you with its nasty damp heat. Oh, there are worse places than poor old Tani-Kul, for all its reputation! You must come in on Sunday—that's to-morrow—and

eat a bit of black buck I was sent. Jessie and the Missus will be glad to see you. Now you'd better be off to the Coffey house, and tell them you are back for good."

The Coffeys were delighted to welcome Vernon, indeed, so were all his friends, and to his own profound relief, he sustained the ordeal of meeting the engaged couple with respectable composure.

It seemed to him, that Charlie Booth looked worn and worried, his air of jaunty optimism had vanished, and his laughter sounded a little forced—although more boisterous than ever. Whatever he might be, Charlie was not happy—and had undoubtedly something on his mind—also he breathed cheap spirits—an unusual circumstance.

When Vernon had encountered Rosita, she was standing by the band-stand, munching chocolates and holding a court.

"Ah, *voilà*, Monsieur Vernon!" she cried, "*quel bonheur!* Oh," she added audaciously, "we have missed you awfulee!"

"It is awfully good of you to say so," he answered, in a tone of singular vibration, and his manner was constrained.

"But why not?" she demanded with effusion, "you shall not go to that odious stuffy place any more—no, no, no!"

Rosita, fascinating, flattering, victorious, would still bind him in her fetters, her humble, heart-broken slave; he read it in her eyes. But although she was lovely, and her smile seduction itself, Rosita's sorceries, as far as Vernon was concerned, were at an end. The magic wand had fallen from her hands! Behold, he was emancipated, released. No one was more astonished at the discovery than Vernon himself. How he had dreaded the first meeting with his false lady-love, and had anticipated embarrassment, stammering confusion,

acute pain. To his amazement, the spell was broken, and he beheld her stripped of her dazzling veil of enchantment—he was conscious that he was free! He recalled the Madras guard's description, "a heartless little devil, who wrung all she could out of everyone, and was always on the make." This indictment was too severe, yet why, though engaged to Charlie Booth, was she wearing his presents? the sapphire brooch, the little enamelled watch, the "Mizpah" bangle.

Rosita was volubly proclaiming the delights of a moonlight picnic, when Holland came up and said:

"Hullo, Vernon—glad to see you. You are just back in time for the racket tournament—I've entered you—and I've been keeping a snipe jheel for you for weeks. I say, come along home with me, now," he added, drawing him away by the arm; "Mary told me I was to be sure and fetch you, she has a lot of things she wants to talk over with you, and any amount of new books."

As Holland and the young man walked away together, Rosita looked after the pair, with a spark in her eye, and there was a shrill note in her voice, as she turned to Pereira, Coquellino, and her circle:

"*Tiens!* Is one permitted to wonder *what* is Mrs. Holland's attraction for the virtuous Vernon?"

Mrs. Sharratt, who was within earshot, gasped and turned away a blazing face.

Holland and his Mary had often discussed Vernon together; she saw into the situation with the keen and sympathetic vision of one who had been a fellow-sufferer—a love affair gone wrong had blighted her own life. Undoubtedly Rosita had led Vernon on, and made a fool of him for her amusement, and the satisfaction of her omnivorous vanity. Mrs. Holland had noted him in the theatre on the night of Rosita's triumph, and subsequently at the door. He looked like

a man who had been recently tortured—she readily guessed the riddle. The Good Samaritan persuaded her husband to write long letters to Vernon (laboured letters which were toil and grief to kind-hearted Tom), she also sent him magazines and friendly little notes. *Now* was the time to throw a plank to this unhappy boy, all alone in Madras, surrounded by temptations and suffering from a sore heart.

At the Hollands', during an appetizing little supper, which included curried prawns, the conversation was animated, but not a word was said about Rosita. Mrs. Holland talked of recent interesting articles, and new books, she played one or two of Schumann's Kinder Lieder, an exquisite Serenade by Saint Saëns by her guest's special request, and subsequently discussed his promised promotion.

"Now," she said, "you will be able to keep a pony at last; I know the Bazaar master has a beauty, a Mahratti, it will go for nothing—it has an unlucky mark—a curl on the neck—and you must give yourself at least a month in the hills."

"Especially the month in the hills," amended Holland; "you've been down three years, you should not overdo it, my boy, and after all, what are you saving for? Your health is your capital. I am sure you have a nice little sum in the Madras Bank—come now?"

But the nice little sum had been reduced by several hundred rupees.

In a surprisingly short time Vernon fell into his old groove (pending promotion), taking the express passengers to Raichore, or the Special mail letters only. He and Booth were on duty off and on, like Box and Cox, and saw but little of one another, thus he was happily spared a certain amount of Booth's raptures and condolences; for Charlie Booth was not a man of particularly keen or delicate perceptions.

One day Vernon, to his surprise, came upon Gojar on the goods platform in broad daylight. He looked ill and emaciated, and was attended as usual by Tom, whose white waistcoat had expanded, and whose arrogance seemed unabated.

Looking cautiously around, Gojar accosted Vernon in English.

"So you are back?" staring into his face.

The young man nodded.

"Then that is well."

"And you? I'd as soon have expected to see an owl in daylight as to meet you—here."

"Oh, I'm not always a night bird, and I've been sick, and cannot rest. Tom Sahib likes a bit of company, too. He is naturally a gay dog. The truth is," turning his back on a distant group, and speaking in a low voice, "there have been some robberies—in the goods shed—yes, in daylight, and by a clever thief. Bales of silk from Bombay cut open, the silk—well—I believe sold in the Bazaar. Oh, there are scores of Budmashes there, but who is the Budmash in the sheds? That is what I'm going to find out. I am still fond of a bit of shikar!" and he laughed. "Once it was tiger—now it's thieves."

"There are a decent lot about," said Vernon. "Old Tipoo and his three sons, and Moonasawmy—no better."

"Yes, I know—it's not of them I'm thinking. When are you coming to see me again?—ever?"

"To-night if you like—I get back at one o'clock."

"Do you still pass sleepless nights?" The tone was sardonic.

"Sometimes," replied Vernon shortly.

Gojar salaamed with ironical dignity, and passed on, followed by Tom, whose gait was developing into a waddle.

CHAPTER XVI

GOJAR was pacing to and fro, lantern in hand, when his visitor appeared amongst the bales of cotton.

"So here you are!" he said. "Sit down and have your smoke, Anah! (Tamil for brother). There is no gunpowder in store, though one day I expect we shall have a tremendous blow-up here."

"You mean about the thefts," rejoined Vernon, as he struck a match; "are you sure of them?"

"Sure! You ask the goods clerk—they are keeping it dark, but there is a leakage here in Tani-Kul, and we must stop it. We don't want another 'Golden Gang' on the line."

"I should say rather not," he answered emphatically. "There's a great temptation to guards."

"Guards! But why guards?" asked Vernon with a touch of irritation.

"Well, my boy, you see they sign the receipts—they know where the bales of silk and jewellery, and so on, are stored."

"Yes, that's true, and they are responsible and easily run in."

"But they can have an accomplice—eh?"

"I think not," said Vernon, who was considerably nettled.

"Oh, I know that as a rule our guards are fine fellows, but every flock has its black sheep; it is a law of Nature. Here is a practical illustration before you. I am a black sheep myself! You are not surprised to hear *that*, are you? Shall I tell you my story?"

"Just as you please," assented the visitor, but his tone was not cordial.

"Possibly it may interest you, and it will certainly surprise you."

"But if it is painful to you to recall things——"

"Not a little bit," he interrupted with a gesture of his lean hand; "I am past all that. I have climbed high on the mountains, and gaze down into the valley with absolute indifference. You have got over one bad bit of road, and I have helped you." Vernon glanced at him keenly. What did he mean?

"There will be other bad bits, no doubt," continued Gojar.

"Seems to me I've had more than my share of bad bits for a good while. I wonder if I shall ever be able to get off these side tracks, and take a spin along the level."

"You mean the broad gauge! I travelled it fast—I know it well, and Gojar chanted in a sing-song key:

"'Oh, thou who didst with pitfall and with gin
Beset the road I was to wander in,
Thou wilt not with predestined evil round,
Enmesh, and then impute my fall to sin.'

"That's old Omar! My people were people of position, I have the right to put 'honourable' before my name—think of that, John Vernon, head guard! and though there was not a pile of money, there were great expectations. My father died when I was about eight, and left my mother with two children to bring up, my sister and myself. Naturally I was her favourite; good-looking, active, clever, cheeky and spoiled. I went to Eton—I fancy that was a bit of a pinch! then into the Army, and came straight out here; my own master, with the glorious world at my feet.

"'Yet ah, that Spring should vanish with the Rose,
That Youth's sweet-scented manuscript should close.'

"I was to do wonderful things—and I surely did—being, as I now see, arrogant, conceited, weak-minded, but not a bad sort. I kept polo ponies, I won gymkhana races—I was petted by pretty women, and as happy as a young king. After a couple of years a man came to the station, a rich, insidious, unprincipled devil. He took a violent fancy to me—if he had shot me at sight it would have been far better—I was naturally immensely flattered; he took me about with him, as his 'young pal,' he taught me cards, and card tricks, gambling, and every sort of dissipation. He stole, being extraordinarily clever and specious, my faith and conscience. I, who sit here looking at you eye to eye—have parted with both."

"Oh, I say—come!" expostulated Vernon.

"In a couple of years I was ruined—secretly ruined. Only the soucars knew all about it. I was steeped in debt past all recovery, and although I was well-looking, well-mannered, well-dressed, and, in a way, well-liked, I declare to you that there was not a greater young rip in the Service."

Vernon removed his cigarette and stared at the speaker, who seemed positively to revel in painting his own protrait in the blackest of hues.

"I cheated—yes, boldly, at cards," continued Gojar. "Now after this confession, you really ought to get up and clear out. To do myself justice, I did not cheat always—only occasionally in sheer desperation. My mentor had departed, I had no resources, and I found it an awful struggle even to pay my mess bill; as for my servant's wages, and those sort of little matters, I simply let them slide. When my mess bill was overdue three months, I received a broad hint from the Adjutant, and one night I was flustered and nervous, I'd been punishing the champagne—I cheated boldly, and failed. There was a terrible scene in the card-room.

Of course, it was all hushed up on account of the regiment—also, of course, I must go! Yes—go—but where? I had no money, no friends. I was sitting on my cot, meditating on razors, when my Captain came in, a real decent sort, and not too well off himself—he had tried to put the skid on several times—no use.

"'Here,' he said, 'are two hundred rupees; I believe you are frightfully hard up. Get off somewhere, and make a fresh start, and for God's sake, and your mother's—keep straight if you can.'

"So I gathered a few traps together that night, and fled away, and became a vagabond on the face of the earth. At first I concealed myself in the good old city of Hyderabad, where all Eastern nations simmer together. Then I went south to the hills, to a tea estate, where I got a billet. I found this deadly slow, and I drifted about hither and thither, till I slipped into a post in a Rajah's training stable. I kept this, which suited me down to the ground, for no less than six years—needless to say under a false name. I had shifted my sky to another Presidency, and was known as Captain Pierrepont. Here I fell in love, and married a beautiful Eurasian, half Cashmeri, half English—a good woman, too. She kept me straight. As long as she lived I prospered. When she died, I was distracted, and went to the bad. I showed my respect for her memory by taking to drink, and from drink naturally I went to pieces. I drank and drank, I upset his Highness's coach, I drugged his race-horses, I played the mischief, and was very properly flung out. Then I took a contract for tonga ponies on the hills, next I was a waiter in a Calcutta hotel, a 'super' in a Calcutta theatre—I even made three trips to Rangoon as steward on the B. I. S., but was fired out for drunkenness. Oh, I have seen life, I can assure you! I wrote myself the most admirable characters,

and supplied lots of first-class chits to impecunious fellows—at a price. At last I gave up pretending to be English, and sank into the purlieus of the China Bazaar in Moulmein. Here another loafer—long since dead—introduced me to the land of dreams, Ganja, and a new phase of life was opened to me. I struggled to keep soul and body together with letter-writing and lies; finally in Blacktown, Madras, I fell sick, and was taken to the Station Hospital—you know the rest."

"And what about your people all this time?" inquired Vernon, with emphasis.

"You have asked that before. My mother is dead—God knows what tale they told *her*. My sister married—she was a pretty girl—my family hope I am dust."

"Then they don't know?"

"They know nothing, Anah," and Gojar shrugged his broad shoulders, "they only *hope*. My sister made inquiries through the Fort chaplain in Madras—I expect the man who got me this job put her on—but no more—just told her I was alive; and now she is dead. I saw her death in a paper about a year ago. The odd thing is, that I may one day be a rich man, 'the expectations' have been long in coming, but I am heir to an uncle aged ninety-one. I had intended to sham dead, and let the money lapse to the Crown. Now I have changed my mind—the lawyers have my address."

Vernon remained silent for some time. At last he said:

"And so you will go home after all!"

"*I*—go home! Do I look like it? Can you see me at a club in Pall Mall, in evening dress clothes? Where could I get my chillum of Ganja? And although money does much, what story could bridge a chasm of

twenty-five years, spent in the highways and Bazaars of India? No, no, I have wasted my substance in riotous living, I am too old to play the Prodigal Uncle —but I will make some amends."

"Then you will leave the fortune to charity—to hospitals?"

"No—not exactly to hospitals—I intend to leave it——" he paused for a moment, and added, "to *you*."

After an astonished silence, Vernon said at last:

"No, no—your own people come first—I could not possibly take it, thank you all the same."

"My sister is dead, the rest of my belongings don't count, I'd rather have one of Tom's hairs than the whole lot of them put together—and the money is not entailed—I am the last in the tail. Now as for you; I know nothing of your life; you keep a still tongue in a cool head. We are all aware that you came from Perambore with a good chit, not a faked one; on this line, no one among the gazetted ranks is accepted unless his character can bear the strictest investigation. I wonder what the Company would say to mine? What lies followed by post? However, I have two or three scruples left, I've never gone back on old Parker. I believe you are honest, a gentleman, and a public school boy. Oh, I recognized some of your little ways!—you are slow—but quite sure; you are strong, and can rule yourself—there is my opinion of you—now for your opinion of *me?*"

Vernon lifted his head, and looked over at Gojar.

"Never mind, I know it, you need not be so embarrassed. The first time you saw me in my real character, you had no doubt whatever in your own mind but that I was insane—a harmless lunatic—is not that so?"

"Well, it is," assented Vernon. "I thought you had a tile off."

"The second time you were not so positive; crazy, but with a certain amount of the 'no fool' element. You were very angry with me—like someone in the Bible, 'you turned and went away in a rage.' To-night, to be plain, you find me merely a wicked, debased, eccentric old brute."

"Only eccentric—yes, that's all," broke in Vernon; "why lead this life? Why not come up to the surface—come out of the Bazaar—and native life, and live with me?"

"The surface—live with you!" cried Gojar, and he laughed so long and so heartily, that he brought on a terrible fit of coughing. "Vernon, if you say such things, you'll be the death of me—you really will. Listen. I *like* my own company. I'm not fit for any other, and I'm not so miserable as you suppose. I am not a pauper—some money I invested out here twenty years ago, and that I looked on as sunk in a mine, has within the last three years paid a dividend! Forty pounds, over four hundred rupees a year. I spend it in books and papers—my lair is comfortable—Tom's collar is silver, he has bones and biscuits. I eat little, I don't drink, Rajee represents my staff—in short I am ten times better off than many a good man! You may act as my substitute. You will make excellent use of the big fortune. Marry some nice English girl, and call your eldest boy—not after me—but—" pointing to the dog, "after Tom. He's a good sort, he never drinks, or cheats, or swears—his moral character is pre-eminently respectable. Tirapoo! Tirapoo! Tom!" and as he spoke, he turned the sleeping dog over with his foot, and gently rubbed his comfortable pinafore. Tom half opened his eyes, then slowly closed them, with an expression of ecstatic satisfaction.

"But I say, bar jokes, I never intend to marry," said Vernon.

"God bless the boy! Why, of course he will marry, when the right girl comes along—they are not all Rositas. You had a great escape there! What a witch it is too! Such extraordinary good looks; though not to be talked of in the same day as my poor wife. There was real beauty, and a beautiful soul looking out of a beautiful face. She died after two days' illness—agony. The doctors called it Cholera—but I, who know the devices of the wicked, feel sure that it was poison!"

"But why? Why should anyone poison her?"

"Because of her lovely face—it proved her misfortune. Certain people about the Court were afraid that she might become dangerous; an alien influence in the Harem. They were wrong, his Highness was always honourable—all the same *she* was sacrificed. The means employed were cruel—powdered glass, mixed with white sugar; her screams used to ring in my ears, till Ganja gave me relief. No doubt it would have been a good job if I had been poisoned too! Well, here I am, as usual discoursing of myself, and I was talking of Rosita. She is a curious, and as it turns out, deadly combination of several races—the flower of the old French noblesse—the pure blood of a proud Brahminee woman—diluted with a strain of the Bazaar, all these combined, have gone to make Rosita! I am thankful that your infatuation for her is cured. She would soon have dissipated your poor little savings, plunged you into debt, and driven you crazy with her love affairs. A woman like Rosita is a witch, and should be tied in a sack and drowned." Gojar's eyes kindled, as he added, "it is due to the public safety."

"Oh, come, I say, even in joke you should not say such things," remonstrated his companion.

"Should I not?" he sneered; "may I venture to

say that you are well rid of her? Don't let her lure you back, my poor boy—she is capable of it, and if Rosita knew that a fortune is coming your way, she would throw over Booth, and nail you within the hour."

"But a fortune is not coming to me," protested Vernon; "it is most awfully good of you to propose to—to make me your heir—but as I have lived lately, I have lost all taste for home luxuries—two hundred rupees a month will keep me comfortably and—and——"

"And you are talking the greatest drivel, and rot," interrupted Gojar, with angry emphasis. "Haven't you a taste for horses and sport, and books and pictures, and refined society? I know it. I intend to leave this money (when I get it) to one who is not a kid-glove, carpet knight; who knows the meaning of hard work, and self-denial. To tell you the truth, I myself have never had the remotest idea of either! The day you pulled me out of those infernal weeds, was not such a bad one for you, as you will discover, before long, for *I* shall not live till ninety-two. You will use the fortune well, and for once I shall be doing a good action—nay, two. I will leave a certain sum for the benefit of poor Whites, the miserable class that come into the moribund ward, and are labelled 'Unknown.' I am also leaving you (should he survive me) Tom Sahib. I've made my last will and testament, and when I am buried in the cotton soil here, you will go home to England, wear my shoes, and marry some nice girl with honest eyes. Yes, it will not be long before you are back in the old country."

"But—supposing—" said Vernon, and his throat seemed dry, "you and I are talking plain words to one another—supposing that I do not wish ever to see England again?"

"Ah!" Gojar leant forward a little, his heavy brows knitted, his hands resting on his stick.

"Supposing—" bringing out the syllables with evident difficulty, "supposing, that I cannot show my face there?"

Gojar rose to his feet and gazed down into Vernon's upturned eyes with a look of piercing inquiry. He remained staring at him silently for at least half a minute. At last he said:

"Even supposing that to be so—I will make you my heir all the same."

CHAPTER XVII

It is not to be imagined that Vernon's four years on the railway were without incidents more uncommon than mere daily duty—such as working brakes, receiving line-clear tickets, and using flags and whistles. Now and then, there were casualties, especially in the pilgrim traffic—deaths from exhaustion, apoplexy and cholera; helpless old people were left behind—children were lost. Then there were the vagaries of the elements to contend with: blistering heat, blinding midday glare, and in the monsoon, a deluge of rain, wild rivers in flood, and broken bridges; matters which are occasionally the cause of terrible anxiety on the Southern lines. A river may be a peaceable, orderly stream, yet within twenty minutes, a sudden freshet in the hills, and it is a roaring, whirling torrent, carrying down on its breast, trees, cattle, and huts. For, as all the world knows, the temper of the Water God is ever violent and hasty.

There had been one serious accident in Vernon's experience, when a train had fallen into a chasm,

carrying with it nearly eighty people. Shortly before this occurred, a native ganger had crossed the bridge, and found it apparently all right. Meanwhile three great stacks of Bhoosa, swept along by the current, had jammed in one arch, the force of the roaring, restrained flood carried the others away, and engine and carriages had crashed into the void, one on top of another, like a box of toys. The accident occurred at night, and luckily rescue was at hand. Vernon, then guard on a goods, which happened to be shunted within a few miles, was, with others, promptly on the spot, and helped to break up compartments, drag out passengers, and make rafts. The railway servants worked with a will, nobly assisted by some soldiers who had escaped from the wrecked train; nevertheless, there were twenty fatalities. It was the most serious disaster that had occurred for years.

Now a breach on a branch line had recently occasioned much inconvenience, and Vernon was guard in charge of an up train, which awaited this tardy connection at a small junction. He knew that the delay would be considerable, for it was understood that a bridge was gone, and the passengers had to be carted round a distance of a mile, in order to effect a junction with the carriages at the far side of the chasm. He went into the little waiting room, and there dispatched his modest breakfast—a cup of coffee, and some sour country bread. Just as he had finished it, the door opened and a first-class traveller entered—a clean-shaven, square-shouldered man of forty, dressed in a well-cut grey suit, and carrying in his hand a leather bag.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed, scrutinizing the guard with a pair of shrewd blue eyes. "Oh, having breakfast, are you? When does this blessed train start—or do you wait for tiffin?"

He had a full, decided voice, and as he concluded, he opened his watch with a jerk, and glanced at it.

"We are due to start in ten minutes," replied Vernon, finishing his coffee; "we have to wait for the Sharabad mail. There has been a break on the line, and she's always delayed."

"Oh—ah!" looking round. "Can I get a cup of coffee here?"

"No, I am afraid not. This is rather a poor sort of place—nothing supplied in the way of refreshments, except the three-chatty water filter. You see, it's only a signalling, ticket-taking station."

"But you seem to have managed a meal all right. Official influence, eh?"

"Not likely," and he laughed "I bring my breakfast with me, and an old Peon here warms up my can of coffee. I have some to spare, if you will accept it?"

"Thanks, I will. I've had a dusty drive of twenty miles, and a tremendous thirst on."

"Do you mean that you drove here?" said Vernon astonished.

"Yes; cut across country in a tonga—the roads awful——"

"But you could have——" Vernon hesitated, the man's journey was no business of his. "You won't mind a tumbler, will you?" pouring out the coffee as he spoke. "After all, it's the French fashion."

The traveller looked at him sharply before raising the glass to his lips; then as he put it down he said:

"*You've* not always been a guard—eh, young man?"

"No," rejoined the other coolly; "once I was a small boy."

"You are English?"

"I am," rather shortly. "Does that seem so extraordinary?"

"I wonder you don't want to get away from all this," remarked the traveller, suddenly walking to the door and spreading his hands towards the yellow plain, which was beginning to lose its shadow of brownish purple. "Please God, *I* shall never see another sunrise in this country!"

"Oh, there are worse places," said Vernon, following him on to the platform.

"No doubt, that is what the souls in Purgatory say to one another. But worse places than the Inferno known as India—by Jove! I don't think so. Everything half Eastern, half make-shift. Look at your disgraceful break-downs!"

"Those sudden rises would puzzle the finest engineers in the world. We do our best."

"And your best," repeated the other, with a sneer, "is *bad*. It's not alone your crawling trains, with their lying time-tables," suddenly producing one, "but what about your post-office? Why, in some districts it's positively farcical! And your preposterous opera-bouffe police force, all bribes and bluster. I can tell you, I've been out here twenty years off and on, and I know India. Now I've ploughed my furrow, and I'm going home—home—by this confoundedly late train—to enjoy a well-earned rest."

"Then I congratulate you," said Vernon. "I suppose you are booked by the *Mongolia?*"

"Yes; I got my berth weeks ago," he answered triumphantly. "To-morrow night I sleep in it, on the *sea*—to think of it! The sea—my last voyage!"

The stranger's voice was full of repressed satisfaction, his manner restless and abrupt. He strolled along the little platform, shading his eyes as he scanned the line. Vernon noticed that his hands were particularly white and well cared for, and that he wore a handsome signet ring. At the back of the station he

observed the tonga and two smoking ponies; a ragged native driver and a coolie were staggering in with two leather portmanteaux, a bag and a dispatch-box.

"Ah, my traps!" said the owner. "My heavy baggage has gone home by long sea, and I'm travelling light, as I am to pick up my wife in Switzerland. *She* never liked this country. A wise woman!"

It struck Vernon, that he seemed excited talkative, and unusually communicative, for a man of his class; but he was doubtless uplifted by the prospects of returning to England for good, and filled with the joy of casting behind him for ever, the glowing, dreamy, and detested East.

"No doubt you find this a precious soft job," he said to Vernon, "and sleep and smoke in your van half the time?"

"You don't know much about a guard's duties, I see, sir. He has to keep his eyes skinned, and note everything in his book—the hour of departure, number of engine, of carriages, approximate weight of train. He has to mark the time, and enter it to the second, or he gets into trouble with the engine-driver; he is the buffer between him, and the authorities."

"Of course, you know this blessed line by heart?"

"Almost every stone on my run. Even at night, I can tell where we are, and whether going up or down a grade, by the sound of the train."

"And I wonder how much longer we are to wait for the sound of *this* infernal train?" said the traveller, shutting his watch with an impatient snap. "One might think it was a funeral that was coming."

"Only a few minutes—she is signalled now."

Presently there was a distant rumble, a puff of smoke, and the express, fifteen minutes behind time, steamed shamelessly into the station. The usual horde of natives began to pour out of the compartments,

then two European passengers descended, and looked sharply about them. One of these was a burly individual in a white drill suit; his helmet had an official air. Walking straight up to the waiting traveller, who already had his grasp on the handle of a door, he tapped him familiarly on the shoulder and said:

"Mr. Mocatto, I believe?"

"What the devil do you mean? What do you want?" demanded the other in a high, nervous voice; his face had grown suddenly white.

"I have a warrant here for your arrest."

"My arrest!" repeated Mocatto, in the same odd, falsetto key. "You are mad. I am Colonel Lennox, of the Governor's bodyguard."

"No, no, sir. You are a Government servant, and I can swear to your identity. You are Mr. Carlo Mocatto, late of the Indian Ink Department. Government have made the painful discovery that you have been disposing of certain information to a foreign Power. Your position gave you great facilities for supplying another nation with our most important official secrets."

The naturally florid countenance of the culprit had assumed the ashen shade of death, but otherwise he gave no sign.

"You nearly got off," resumed the police officer. "Another five minutes would have done it—the cross country tonga business was smart. You always were clever. Now you will pursue the journey in our company, as far as Poona Jail; the chain of evidence against you is absolutely complete."

"I—I—don't understand you——" he stammered.

"You will understand what I mean when I tell you that Arokasawmy and Rungasawmy, your two accomplices, have spoken. We have all their papers." For

a full minute there was no sound, save the monotonous drip of the water chatty.

"Ah, I see," muttered the culprit, with a suppressed groan. "Serves me right for trusting natives. I submit—yes, I'll go quietly—I'll give no trouble; but first let me fetch a coat I left in the waiting-room."

He looked fixedly at Vernon; agony and despair shone from his eyes; he seemed about to say something, but evidently changed his mind. The waiting-room was within two steps; he turned and entered. The stout police officer had a sudden misgiving, a glimmer of suspicion, and rushed forward just a second too late. There was a sharp report, a flash; the escaped prisoner had gone quietly. He fell face forward on the floor—stone dead.

The two police officers raised the body between them.

"My God! he has done it!" exclaimed the younger man. "Well, a fellow who betrays his own country deserves to be shot."

"But it was not exactly his own country," corrected the elder of the two, momentarily shaken by the tragedy. "Poor beggar! I believe an extravagant wife at home has to answer for *this*. Just close the door, will you, Todd? Fetch his coat and throw it over him. And you"—turning to Vernon—"run and wire for a doctor to Tunda. Say he must come down at once on a trolley and certify the cause of death—and, I say, don't stir; you are a witness. The under-guard can take on the train."

Whilst they awaited the arrival of the doctor, the two officials had the dead man's baggage carried into the ticket-office, and there they opened the portmanteaux and box, and discovered a mass of incriminating evidence—plans of lines, number of rolling stock, power of engines, and the weight bridges could carry;

in short, a most complete and valuable haul intended for another nation.

As the pair prosecuted their investigations, Vernon went into the waiting-room and disturbed a buzzing cloud of flies. There lay a prone figure. On the floor, a dark stream dyeing the boards, the empty tumbler used half an hour previously by the suicide. Vernon shuddered involuntarily; there was something horrible in suicide—a man's own life! Once or twice a voice had muttered to *him*, but he had thrust it aside. These evil whispers luckily can only suggest; they are powerless to compel.

Official business brooked no delay. Even as he stood, Vernon could hear the recurring sound of a mattack, and regular digging in the compound. Yes, already they were preparing Mocatto's last home! With professional promptitude, the doctor arrived, and duly certified the cause of death: the man had blown out his clever brains. It appeared that Mr. Mocatto had carried on his base trade for a long time wholly unsuspected. An air of prosperity and general bonhomie had been his cloak—a cloak which native accomplices had unexpectedly stripped from him. On his person were found letters from his wife in Switzerland, and a locket containing the painted photo of a remarkably pretty woman. Perhaps he had fallen into temptation through her—she was notoriously extravagant. As the same lady sat in the window of a fashionable hotel, looking out on the snow-shrouded mountains above, the budding orchard below, and the sunset, she little guessed at what the sun had witnessed in a distant land—a hasty and reluctant death—a hurried burial in the corner of a little railway enclosure. Interment in India is necessarily immediate. Vernon, who was present, repeated aloud a few sentences from the Burial Service; he had heard

it so often that he almost knew it by heart. After the others had departed, he cut two pieces of wood, made a rude cross and stuck it at the head of the new grave.

The police officials, having conscientiously collected the dead man's belongings, and written a voluminous report, travelled in the same train with Vernon, and two days later a paragraph in the *Madras Mail* announced that:

"Mr. Carlo Mocatto, on his way to England on retirement, had died very suddenly at Bowen-Villay Station, on the morning of the 13th inst., and friends were invited to accept this the only intimation."

The incident made an extraordinary impression on Vernon. He had never been so closely connected with a tragedy, and could not drive the dead man's face—no, nor the horror of his last look—out of his thoughts. He recalled the man himself, with the rapturous glow of something accomplished—of release—of home; his half-contemptuous pity for the unenterprising guard, and then the ghastly change, the still, rigid figure—the coffin made of a packing-case—the mound—the crooked cross.

In the course of his duties, Vernon was obliged to pass that lonely station and solitary cross at least three times a week, and it is not too much to say that it got upon his nerves. When a certain little flat-roofed building rose into sight, he hated it and feared it precisely as if it embodied an imminent and deadly danger; for to him, that solitary sun-baked mound seemed to cry piteously and ceaselessly for a companion!

Undoubtedly it was full time that Vernon had a change to the hills.

CHAPTER XVIII

Six months had elapsed since a certain troop train had passed through Tani-Kul, and the time had brought many changes to that place of change. Vicars was securely married—and moored; Rosita's wedding-day was fast approaching, the glories of her trousseau were on every woman's tongue, and the number and value of her presents, especially from men, eclipsed all similar offerings within the combined memories of Tani-Kul, and Raichore! Jessie Sharratt was engaged to a smart young Scotchman, an engineer; he had come down from Poona, with a cricket team, and straightway fallen in love with Jessie's Scotch shade of hair, her pleasant manners and sound common-sense; and as Jock McClellan was an even better match than Vicars, naturally the heart of Mrs. Sharratt was proud and glad within her. Several officials had been promoted; various people had come and gone. Among minor occurrences, it may be mentioned that Mrs. Coffey had invested in an incubator, that the station-house had been newly painted, and the gold mohur tree—shading the "chief seat"—was dead.

Vernon was altered, and by no means for the better; he looked thin and hollow-eyed, as if the strenuous life and climate had sucked all vitality out of his constitution; he felt slack, and out of sorts, and had made up his mind to take his long overdue leave to the hills within a month. Many notes from Captain Breakspeare had reached him, all written large, all set in the same key. The last had said:

"You must really clear out of the railway business; you are bound to find something better. I will help you, of course. How would you like to set up as a gentleman trainer? and begin with my two crocks? Anyhow, nothing could be worse than where you are; the heat must be frightful, and you never come across any people of your own class. You are bound to get into some matrimonial scrape: a country-bred wife with, say, even two annas in the rupee, would be the very devil. I've seen it here. I am not denying the beauty, nor the magnificent dark eyes—they are dangerously attractive, and I must confess I am rather nervous with respect to that enchanting little person in the pink hat. I've inquired for her continually; but you never mention her—*a bad sign*."

At the present moment Vernon was sitting on the steps of the Coffey house, with this letter in his pocket—it had only arrived that morning. Oh, it was easy enough for Breakspeare to write! He was a good fellow, but childishly ignorant of the scramble for employment, and bread—if he were to chuck the railway, how was he going to live? Gentleman trainer without capital—no—and here he might rise to be station-master, and even traffic superintendent. He was becoming attached to the line; jealous of its reputation; proud of its successes; he knew all its strong points, its weaknesses, and its superstitions. For instance, that Engine 105 had a bad name, and was openly shirked by drivers, and firemen. 105 had already been in two accidents—with but little damage to *itself*; and there was a certain deep cutting near Poori-Natty, where all native drivers and even some European guards, declared that there was a devil. The cutting had been carried through the ruins of an old Temple, and the Temple gods were angry!

He had talked face to face with sane men, who swore that they had seen "something"—something vague, and black, with a horrible devilish grin—no, not a bush, a boulder, or a stray buffalo—a shape gigantic and malignant. Many travellers were sensible of a strange and pungent atmosphere, peculiar to this part of the line, especially after dark—but none could identify it, until two well-known missionaries pronounced it to be the odour of Temple sacrifices! dead flowers, ghee, incense, and blood. This would account for the blare of horns, and deafening drumming of tom-toms, which occasionally burst upon a passing train, and accompanied it through the cutting!

And why should *he* laugh and jeer? Had he not his own sensations with respect to another portion of the line, and a certain crooked cross?

In his case, Vernon felt confident that it was merely want of change—he was a bit out of sorts. Mrs. Coffey was dosing him with a nauseous concoction she called a "tonic," and forcing on him her largest new-laid eggs. Booth was no longer a fellow inmate, jealous of such attentions; he and Katty had differed with respect to Rosita, and he now lived in a boarding-house, whose hostess proved more appreciative of the charms of Mademoiselle Fontaine. Nevertheless Booth and Vernon still remained good friends; had they not come to Tani-Kul at the same time? and together borne the burthen, and heat of many days? And to Vernon he confided his troubles, and his bitter complaints of Mother Tanzy. How she bullied Rosita, how thievish she was about money, altogether a regular double-faced old cat! He had suggested (as she seemed anxious to hurry up the wedding) that he and Rosita should live with her and Tanzy. They had two spare rooms, and he would pay half "Bazaar" and half servants' wages. It would save a lot of

bother, expense and delay; and she would not be parted from Rosita. But this arrangement did not appeal to Madame Tanzy; she had suddenly shown her claws, and flown at him and said:

"That she had supported her niece for the best part of her life; and she did not bargain to keep her niece's husband as well!"

Altogether, as Booth had expressed it, "she had been at high pressure, and carried on like seventy miles an hour." He further imparted that the little girl had terribly grand notions—and was as extravagant as a duchess. These confidences, always in the same strain—condemnation of Madame, and rapturous praise of Madame's adopted daughter, had ever the same conclusion; Charlie would declare that he was "cleared out to the last pice," jauntily borrow a handful of rupees, and saunter away to duty—or Rosita!

As Vernon sat on the steps in his shirt sleeves, he was languidly turning over various matters in his mind. Breakspeare's letter—Booth's harassed face and jerky manner—sure signs of worry—money worries too. His gay blue eyes now looked clouded and anxious; he was but a poor specimen of the happy and triumphant lover; irritable too—an ominous symptom. There he went to his quarters, with a sharp word and a hasty push to Coquellino's little brother Pedro de Castro. Pedro was a preternaturally thin, impish-looking *gamin*, with lank black hair, a squeaky voice, and a fierce cast in the left eye; a persistent tease and talker, he rebounded from the most violent rebuffs, like an india-rubber ball.

Tani-Kul, in spite of its situation and climate, could make a goodly show of chidren; pale-faced, scantily clad, but vigorous and lively. Among these, Charlie Booth had a large acquaintance; his fund of boisterous

good nature appealed to them, but occasionally (as to-day) its supply was suddenly cut off, and he became harsh, glum and alarming. But Jack Vernon was different; though quieter, and less given to jokes, he was by far the most popular of the two. The small fry adored him; always the same, he had a cheery word for them, was liberal in the matter of chocolates, and even picture-books, and looked so beautiful on horseback! Among his chief friends, were his near neighbours, Clarice and Ermentrude Jacks, Reginald Murphy, and Bobby Beard. Katty, who had rather a soft corner for children, sometimes suffered this quartette to play in her roomy lower verandah, with its indestructible brick floor.

On this particular afternoon, the children were thoroughly enjoying themselves during Mrs. Coffey's prolonged absence in the Bazaar. "Railway" was naturally the favourite game at Tani-Kul, where everything was "railway." At the moment, four old kerosene oil tins (where would India be without these?) were linked together, and drawn by a toy engine. The freight consisted of a loudly indignant cat and three of Katty's precious game chickens. Ermentrude and Clarice impersonated two fussy lady travellers, with fans and cushions, screaming for the guard and porters, and pushing one another about in a most unladylike fashion. Reggie was the guard, with a whistle and a green flag, and Bobbie, as became the son of his father, engine driver. His sole idea of his responsibilities was concentrated in a large oil rag, with which he smeared or touched up everything—including his own face, and the legs and arms of Mrs. Coffey's verandah chairs. Bobbie was a pretty boy, with wide apart blue eyes and a shock of flaxen hair—in flattering request as Cupid at local *tableaux vivants*.

At present he wore a painfully tight (once white)

sailor-suit, and as he rubbed his toy engine he chanted in a clear treble the engine-driver's rhyme:

"When you find Red over Red,
Always short of it—stop dead.
If above the Red is Green,
Cautious driving it must mean.
Red o'er Green, or Green below,
Perfect safety, on you go.
Green o'er Red, or Green alone,
Stop as dead as any stone."

"I say, old man, I wish you would shut up! Put on the hand-brake," said Vernon, who in spite of energetic disclaimers found himself the chief person in the game; in short His Excellency the Governor, travelling with his suite—three game chickens and the expostulating cat.

"Do lend us your ticket-puncher, Mr. Vernon," urged Reggie, a ridiculous figure in a tartan kilt, very thin bare legs, and an enormous mushroom topee. "I'm head guard, you see—will you?"

"No, not to-day, kiddies; I think we have had about enough of trains—this blessed express has been an hour starting. Why don't you play ships, for a change?"

"'Cos there's no water," replied Bobbie, "and we've never seen a ship. Tell us another game."

"Play soldiers, you and Reggie—go and do sentry in the back verandah—that will be capital."

"Oh, yes, and we'll be two officers' ladies," eagerly supplemented Clarice. "I'll be the one with the long veil, and streeling dress," and she began to strut up and down, calling with great arrogance:

"Ayah—ayah! Now where *is* that ayah!"

"No, that's no officer's lady," objected her sister; "yer doing Mrs. Dancock when she walks past Madame Tanzy in the Gardens, with her head in the air and a smell under her nose."

"Yah! we don't want no girls' rot," cried Pedro,

precipitating himself into the subject; "let's be Afghans!"

"You can be a Hafghan if ye like," said Clarice, with withering scorn, "you being black, 'a Kali Admi'! —but we are *white*, and play white games."

The immediate result of this remark was a screaming cuffing conflict, which raged so furiously that the Governor's representative was compelled to rise and forcibly drive the entire party off the premises. Having dispersed his companions and suite, Vernon had now the verandah to himself and his reflections.

The hot weather was approaching, storms of white dust swept over the station; the rails were red hot to the hand. Already the brain fever bird—although there was but scant accommodation for him—had put in his dreaded appearance.

Vernon decided that he would clear out soon—June was a bad month, and perhaps he would take June, but all the same, he felt strangely reluctant to move. He had grown used to Tani-Kul, he felt so slack and utterly played out, averse to any enterprise that was not official. The indolence of ill-health was eating into his bones. He languidly turned over the pages of a three-days-old *Pioneer*, and studied the advertisements and fashions of neat suits for the hills; hats, boots, leggings—of course he must buy himself some decent clothes, even if he did not mix in society. How was he going to bear himself in an atmosphere of manners and good-breeding? A certain amount of manners and good-breeding were common to Tani-Kul, the good-breeding of sympathy, kindness, and good-fellowship—but it was the raw material, and lacked gloss.

As he sat there endeavouring to decide which style of lounge coat he preferred? a shadow interposed between him and the sun; he looked up and saw a Post Office peon with a telegram in his hand.

"For me?" he asked in surprise.

The man grunted assent.

Yes, it was correctly addressed to "J. Vernon, Head Guard, Tani-Kul," and the answer was prepaid. He tore open the envelope and read the enclosed long message:

"Most urgent, meet train from Jolapett arriving 5.30, tall, dark young lady, blue and white gown, panama hat, hand-bag and suit-case, Arminger, detain by father's authority, bring back night mail Jolapett, will be met.

"BREAKSPEARE."

Vernon gave a long expressive whistle. A tall young lady in blue, who was undoubtedly making a bolt of it! There was no mention of a companion—how could he tackle her, he was entirely unaccustomed to young ladies. Still he must do what he could for Breakspeare—could it be Breakspeare's girl? He rose to his feet, stretched himself, and looked at the sky. It was now about four o'clock. Taking a duplicate from the peon, he scribbled:

"Tani-Kul, four o'clock, will do my best. JACK.'

This he handed to the coolie, who put it into his pouch and strolled away. Well, anyhow, the die was cast! his train left Tani-Kul at eleven o'clock, and he could deliver the lady at Jolapett in time for Chotah Hazree

He toiled up to his room, and changed into a clean suit, brushed his hair and smartened himself up in preparation for the coming struggle. Then, happy thought! He went round to Mrs. Holland—the idea of Mrs. Coffey's aid he had hastily dismissed, for, according to her oft-repeated statement, "she could not abide girls." This girl would have a wait of four solid hours—what was he to do with her all that time? It was too

much of a responsibility. He had frequently to deal with Purdah women, and their elaborate arrangements for concealment, their long winding lanes of cloth, their tittering, their little screams, their agonized terror until they reached the seclusion of a carriage. He had before now carried several harems, also a Begum and her suite; had once interposed between a man who was beating his wife (and had been considerably mauled by the lady), but he had never yet been entrusted with the delicate mission of interfering to stop a runaway, nor did he feel competent for the task; for although firm and even masterful with his own sex, he was by no means sure of his nerves where a woman was concerned.

If the young lady in blue was positively determined to go forward, say to Bombay, he could not possibly use physical force, and she, like most of her sex, would probably have her own way. He decided to keep his own counsel, with the one exception of Mrs. Holland —he must look her up, and beg for her advice and assistance.

"To meet a young lady, and send her back by the eleven o'clock train," said Mrs. Holland, putting down her work and staring at her visitor; "Mr. Vernon, you are not in earnest?"

"I am sorry to say I am," he answered doggedly.

"You will never do it," and she laughed a provoking laugh.

"Well, I'm bound to have a try, though I confess I feel awfully frightened; almost as if I were going to be married! Of course, I shall make the lady my mortal enemy, but that can't be helped. If I do manage to stop her, may I bring her up to you, and leave her in your charge?"

"Yes, by all means. I will do everything I can to help you. I wonder if she will be pretty?"

"It's all the same to me if she is the pig-faced lady," declared Vernon. "Breakspeare has let me in for an awful business. I wish myself well out of the job."

"And I wish you luck," said Mrs. Holland. "Dear me, what a tiresome man your friend must be—first he leaves you a sick horse—now he asks you to stop someone's runaway daughter. I shall be delighted to help, and will go down to the station about six o'clock, and if you should be successful, will take the runaway off your hands altogether."

"Mrs. Holland, you are an angel!" he exclaimed. "I say—I wish you would meet her, instead of me, will you?"

"No, no—I've no authority. Go and do your best—or worst, from *her* point of view. Shall I throw a shoe after you?"

John Vernon felt an unusual amount of nervous anticipation as the Bombay passenger, well up to time, steamed into the station.

Tani-Kul was the stopping-place for dinner, and a horde of voracious passengers poured out of the train, determined not to lose one single precious moment. Vernon, the guard, stood near the door of the refreshment-room, and watched the ingoing hungry crowd. No tall girl in blue was among them—in fact, there was no one in blue and a panama hat, tall or short, as far as he could discover. The young lady was not in the train, perhaps she was clever, and had given him the slip at an intermediate station? He strolled along by the empty carriages, untidy with books, parcels, and pillows. Ah! the last one was occupied, a figure sat in a far corner. He looked again, and noticed a blue skirt, the fugitive's face was turned away, but undoubtedly here she was!

"Twenty minutes' wait here," he announced in his

clear official voice. "Won't you get out, miss, and have some refreshment?"

"No, thank you," she said stiffly.

The girl had turned her head, and was looking at him with a pair of haughty grey eyes, fringed with black. She had a short nose, a short upper lip, a delicate complexion—yes, she was pretty.

"Nothing again, you know, until six to-morrow morning in Bombay," he urged unabashed. "I would recommend you to have at least a cup of soup or tea—travelling alone, I suppose?" he inquired, his hands resting at either side of the door, his quick eyes noting a suit-case and dressing-bag.

"Well, if there really *is* twenty minutes," she said, "perhaps I had better get out," and she rose as she spoke.

The lady was very tall, and held herself splendidly. It seemed to Vernon, as he moved aside, that a young empress had descended from the train.

"Where is the refreshment-room?" she asked brusquely. He pointed out the door, towards which she moved off with a remarkably light, swinging gait.

Well, he had inveigled her out of the train; so far so good—if he could only keep her out. And now for her baggage. He climbed into the carriage and hastily collected her bag, suit-case, a rug, cloak, umbrella —Arminger—yes, all right. These he placed carefully aside, and then made his way into the crowd. There was a hungry mob in the refreshment-room—a full train for the English mail—experienced old travellers had already been served, but the case of the young lady in blue seemed hopeless. She so far had failed to attract a waiter's attention, or obtained anything to eat; her attitude expressed dignified resentment as Vernon moved up close to her and said:

"Excuse me, miss, as you are travelling alone—if you

will allow me, I will get you something—and send it to you in the ladies' waiting-room—third door to the left."

The girl stared at him for a moment with her pair of deep-grey, interrogative eyes; presumably his looks were honest—although in the present case they belied him—for she said, "Very well," and moved away.

Vernon was a considerable time in joining her, for foraging had proved difficult. He discovered her seated at a table in the empty waiting-room, her gloves removed, her veil thrown back. He was immediately followed by a Goanese boy, who carried a tray on which was displayed the inevitable cold fowl, bread, buffalo butter, lemonade, and a bunch of Cabul grapes.

"I am sorry the best things are gone," he explained apologetically; "you see, you were a little late." The lady was already swallowing the iced lemonade with an avidity that spoke of painful thirst. "I hope this is better than nothing. I have paid the waiter to save time."

Oh, what a hound he was, betraying the confidence of this tall princess with the clear, all-thrilling grey eyes—eyes the colour of his mother's.

"You are very good," she said, setting down an empty tumbler, "and I will depend upon you, to let me know when my train is starting."

To this request he made no reply. The guilty wretch was unconsciously perusing the refreshment-room tariff, framed on the wall, just over his victim's head:

Chotah Hazree, 8 annas.
Tiffin, 1 rupee, 8 annas.
Dinner, 2 rupees.
Tea, per cup, 2 annas; with bread, 6 pice.
Native meal, 2 annas, 6 pice per cake.
Pongul, 2 annas.
Coffee, per tumbler, 1 anna, 3 pice.

Then he walked to the window and stood with his back to his companion. His senses strung to unusual alertness, he was listening intently. Ah! the noise of a train thundering into the Junction almost drowned the sounds of the departure of the Bombay mail. When the young lady had finished her meal, she rose and pushed back her chair. He turned about, in time to see her standing up, shaking the crumbs from her skirt, her purse was in her hand, and as her eyes met his:

"Now for it!" he said to himself, with a throb of apprehension.

"How soon does the train leave?" she inquired.

"Which train?" he asked, with a firm yet deferential glance.

"Why, *my* train, of course—the Bombay up, to catch the mail," she answered, with a touch of impatience.

"Well, I'm very sorry—but the fact is—it has—just gone."

"Gone!" she repeated incredulously, "not the mail, not—gone! Oh, then I shall miss my steamer—I believe——" and she grew suddenly white, "that you did this on purpose!" She was not really as tall as the unfortunate young man, but she seemed to tower over him by twelve feet. "Did you?" she reiterated, "can you speak the truth?"

"Oh, yes, I can," he looked her steadily in the face, all propitiation had vanished from his manner. "I admit that I detained you."

"Then I shall report you!" she cried passionately, "yes, and have you dismissed. What is a guard for but to look after passengers—why, you actually decoyed me out of the carriage—I never heard of such outrageous conduct—never! Oh, of course—yes—someone sent a wire—the Pater—oh," with a catch in her breath, "it was too bad—too mean!"

Vernon was miserably uncomfortable as these epithets were hurled at him in a sharp nipping tone. He felt himself to be at a sore disadvantage; in this girl's tone and air, he realized the six years of life that separated him from her, and his equals. He was conscious of this for the first time! Undoubtedly she looked upon him as a common man; a common railway guard, who would be handsomely tipped for his interference—yes, he read all this in her angry eyes. He was a clumsy, awkward boor in the presence of this well-born young damsel, with her proud carriage, her delicate attire, her dainty violet-scented wrap; a being from another world—the upper world. She made him feel himself a cur—and a cad—even in his own head station.

"Oh, what an idiot I was to get out of the train!" she exclaimed. "But how could I possibly know that the guard had been bribed, and that——?"

"I was not bribed," he interrupted suddenly, assuming an attitude of defence. "It is nothing to me, whether you go to England or not. A friend wired to me, for your father, to stop you—a pleasant, and grateful task!"

"A grateful task—yes, I don't care what you say, and I was so thirsty—and you tempted me. Oh, Granny, Granny, what shall I do—what shall I do?" and she suddenly turned her back on him and moved towards the window. This was awful, she was crying, he could see her shoulders shaking with stifled sobs.

What a meddling ass he had been to interfere. It was no part of his official duty to take charge of runaway girls, or to act as guardian as well as guard. In miserable silence he awaited her next move, but was not kept long in suspense. After a few seconds she turned upon him fiercely, and said:

"Well—what are you waiting for? A tip?"

"No, I am waiting to see, if I cannot help you in some way."

"Help me! *You!*" the emphasis was withering.

"Yes—I——"

"Then help me to get back to England. That is all I want. I suppose—no, of course—father wired to stop me."

"No."

"Then it was Tony Breakspeare, and I *hate* him; how dared he interfere?"

"You are under age, I suppose?"

"Pray, what is my age to you?"

"Excuse the unpardonable liberty, but you are running away, are you not?" and a slight, irritating smile played round his mouth.

"Oh, you may call it running away, if it amuses you. I am going home to my relations—and there is not another steamer for a week. Oh, it is too bad!"

"Perhaps at the end of a week you may have changed your mind—second thoughts are best."

"Who are you, I wonder?"—and she gave him a quick look. "You talk—like—a—a—a—gentleman."

"I am only a guard. Breakspeare—I mean Captain Breakspeare, knows me."

"Oh, then you are a gentleman—of course?"

"It by no means follows that Captain Breakspeare confines his acquaintance to his own class. What are your plans?" he asked.

"My plans," and she laughed hysterically, "have been most effectually shattered by you. What orders have you received—you dare not show them?"

"They are here," and he displayed the wire.

"I may not see it, of course—you are afraid that I would snatch it."

"The telegram is my authority," handing it to her.

"You see what it contains—an urgent request, meet the 5.30, and detain a lady in a blue dress."

"Oh, this hateful blue dress! If I had only listened to an instinct that warned me to cover it with my dust-cloak."

"And you would now have been on your way to England."

"Yes—and free."

"Free?" he repeated.

"From detestable influences and odious people. I had just enough money to go home second-class—and now——!"

"Perhaps your life out here may improve. Are you not inclined to do things on impulse?"

"Pray who told you that?" she demanded sharply.

"No one—I guessed it. You have a wait here of four hours for the night mail."

"Do you imagine that I am going back?"

"Certainly," he faced her, and the lines of his mouth and the steadiness of his eyes expressed unflinching determination. "I am guard of the train; and you will be in my charge to Jolapett, and——"

Here a door opened, and Mrs. Holland, looking remarkably cool and ladylike, entered quietly.

"Mrs. Holland," said Vernon, "this young lady is travelling to Jolapett to-night. It is not very pleasant waiting in this noisy station," then to Miss Arminger, "Mrs. Holland lives here, and if you will go over with her to her bungalow, she will look after you, I know, and I will fetch you in time for the 11.7 myself."

And without another word he went out.

"I am afraid you have been rather unlucky in your journey," said Mrs. Holland, in her clear, high-bred voice. "This is a dreary place, and I shall be so pleased, if you will come home with me—you look tired, and you shall have some tea and lie down and rest."

"You are extremely kind, but who are you?" inquired the young lady. "That extraordinary young man first of all inveigled me out of my train on false pretences, then calmly hands me over to you. Perhaps you will be good enough to explain?"

"Oh, certainly; his name is Vernon—he is a friend of ours—my husband is locomotive foreman. Mr. Vernon is thoroughly reliable. Now do please come with me, you cannot remain here, all alone for hours. I am sure you have a terrible headache from all the glare and heat. I was once a nurse, so I know all about it."

Mrs. Holland's firm personality, and charm of manner, presently dissipated the girl's ill humour; the invitation was eventually accepted. Lying on a couch, with a handkerchief steeped in eau-de-cologne over her forehead, Miss Arminger felt better, and now that her temper had cooled and her angry pride subsided, *quite* at the bottom of her heart she was glad to find herself still in India. What a sweet, dim room—so restful and so refined. There were pictures and photos on the walls, and Mrs. Holland, sitting there knitting—somehow her presence was soothing—she felt as if she were an old friend. Her eyes strayed languidly around, and as they rested on a framed but faded photograph she sprang up from the cane sofa and crossed the room.

"Coltswood—I declare!" she exclaimed. "How did you get it? And—why, here is a group—yes, of us! The Archdeacon, and Jessie, and Grannie, and Tom, and *me*, when I was eight years old—but what does it mean? Did you buy this at an auction?" and she hurled the questions at her hostess.

"I will tell you, if you can keep a secret."

"Of course I can."

"Coltswood was my old home—the Archdeacon was my father—and I think you must be little Beatrice Arminger?"

"Yes," staring hard for a moment, "and you are Mary who went away years ago, and became a nurse in India?"

Mrs. Holland nodded.

"Oh, Mary—how extraordinary! I remember you so well, and the pink doll with one leg. Are you not going to kiss me?"

"Beatrice, I am indeed. You were always a naughty little girl, but we all adored you. Tell me what have you been doing now?"

"Well, I suppose I must make a clean breast of it. You will recollect how Grannie spoils me, and father too? He got a Staff appointment out here three years ago—and—married again! Do imagine the shock! But the lady—a widow—wrote sweet letters, and her photo was lovely—and so, though I'd always been first, I put up with her, and then when I had been presented, father said I really must come out and try them for a year. I've tried them for six months—'bus,' as they say in these parts—and now I'm going home."

"No, no, naughty Beatrice!"

"The Dad is the same in a way; but I'm not first any more. This question has been simmering for ages; the choice between Mrs. Arminger and me—and it's her, and I'm miserable; and so I ran away to where I am always first, and that's with Gran."

"I'm afraid you are a dreadfully spoiled child. Poor Trixie, you will have many sorrows—how can you expect to be first with everyone. Pray who is first with you?"

"Daddy,"

"No, indeed—*yourself*, dear."

"Oh, Mary, surely not!"

"Yes, you have been so petted and indulged. Have you thought of the trouble to your father, if you go home; and the talk; and of your poor Grannie, who

is so proud of you, her dear Beatrice; who could not endure India, because she was jealous of her step-mother, and ran away."

"As you tell it—it sounds horrid—oh, horrid!"

"And what other complaint or grievance have you, my dear?"

"Well, Mrs. Arminger wants to get me married."

"That you can easily resist."

"Not so easy, when the man is pushing too—it's a case of two to one. Still, I can see now, that I've been selfish, foolish and impulsive—but if I go back, I shall look so very small."

"You could never do that, Trixie," and Mrs. Holland smiled. "You must be at least five foot eight!"

"And this domineering young man—do you know that he actually coaxed me out of the train, and boldly confessed to it. I was so rude to him; I made him furious; positively white with anger."

"Oh, I daresay he will forget all that—he knew he was doing his best."

"What a stubborn face he has—just like flint."

"Do you think so? I never noticed it."

"I am sure he would hold on to anything like grim death. Now, Mary, do tell me all about yourself—why are you here? We heard that you were married—that was all."

"All! And a good deal, is it not? Yes, I am married and done for, this five years. My health was not equal to the nursing, the constant standing, the long hours, and I am the wife of Tom Holland, locomotive foreman, a man of the people; and one of Nature's gentlemen."

"And happy, Mary—are you happy?"

"Who is happy? As far as Tom is concerned, he does his utmost to make me happy; but mine is naturally a discontented nature—always craving for the

impossible—always supercritical—it is a terrible drawback, and I do my utmost to scourge it."

"So you have a discontented nature, and I have my wild impulses and self-will. We have all our little imps of mischief. I wish I could stay here with you, Mary, for a week or two. Couldn't you stick me in anywhere? You would improve me, advise me, and do me no end of good."

"Dear child, I only wish you could; but I must honourably return you to the Colonel to-morrow morning. He is not to know who I am—remember that—I do not wish to shock his susceptibilities—Mary, whom he used to dance with, when she was a girl, whose father was his mother's closest friend, adviser and neighbour—the wife of a mechanic—oh, no!"

"Surely you don't think the Pater is that sort. No, he is not a snob."

"Never mind, I will not risk the experiment. Now, my dear, please do lie down again, and rest yourself."

But Miss Arminger absolutely refused to lie down and rest; she much preferred to explore the bungalow and examine her friend's domestic treasures, sitting at last on a little "morah" at her feet, and pouring confidences into her sympathetic ears. These confidences were interrupted by a sound of brisk footsteps in the verandah, the chick was violently pushed aside, and enter Rosita and Madame Tanzy.

Their excuse, volubly explained, was to make inquiries about a lost library book, in reality to discover who the stylish young woman was who had been met at the train by Mrs. Holland? Another *lady*, no doubt! No doubt at all! and a great lady too. As Beatrice talked to Rosita of the dust, and the glare, she was conscious of the glamour of the girl's personality. No, never in her life had she been face to face with such loveliness! The other instinctively

realized that between herself and this tall, self-possessed girl with the thick brown hair and grey eyes, lay a world of difference—and yet she was not as smartly dressed, or as handsome as herself; nor was she stand-off or proud! What was it that puzzled Rosita?

For her part, Miss Arminger endeavoured to make herself agreeable to these railway people who were Mary's friends!—Yes, the stranger called Mrs. Holland "Mary," and there was no question in their minds that she dropped from some big station on a visit.

"And are you making a long stay?" inquired Madame Tanzy with an air of oppressive benevolence.

"No, only a few hours," answered the new arrival.

"Just to see an old friend?" and her sharp black eyes travelled restlessly from face to face.

Miss Arminger bowed, and then added:

"One of my oldest friends."

"I'm sorry you are not stopping, for there is a good deal going on here just now. A dance on Tuesday—are you fond of dancing?"

"Yes—sometimes—it depends upon various things."

"You mean partners, I suppose?" and Madame Tanzy sniffed. "*You* would not dance with young men in cotton gloves, or no gloves at all!"

"Oh, I was thinking of the floor and band, they are half the battle," and she glanced at the other girl.

Meanwhile Rosita was considering the visitor with a stare of insolent curiosity; her dress was plain, but the material was new; very fine, and not to be had from Box-wallahs; the make, too, was uncommon—it looked simple, but when she came to measure it in her eye, it was otherwise—and how many yards? Oh, lots—it would cut into at least sixteen!

"I am sure you like dancing," said Beatrice, addressing her.

"Oh, yes, awfully; I should rather say so!"

"Why, Rosita is the best dancer in Tani-Kul, or, indeed, on the line," boasted her aunt, "as good as a professional at the skirt-dancing, and does wonderful steps, out of her own head."

"Then no wonder you enjoy it! I should like to see you dance."

"I'm afraid as you are not staying on there is not much chance of that," said Madame Tanzy, rising at last in despair of gleaning more intelligence. With palpable reluctance the visitors prepared to take leave; their farewells were prolonged—many were the "after-thoughts." Nevertheless the combined wits of Madame and her niece—though a formidable combination—failed to discover this tall stranger's name, address, or even business. She had talked freely, but told nothing. A warning finger on Mary's lip had been her guide.

No one could suppose that this agreeable and self-possessed damsel was the identical girl who a few hours previously had with impassioned fury, denounced Vernon, the guard.

It was naturally Madame Tanzy's province to report on new-comers, criticize their manners, and to deliver judgment as to their social fate; but in the present instance, in spite of her extraordinary efforts, the baffled lady went empty away.

"That girl is simply lovely," said Beatrice, as she watched Rosita trip down the path, with high-heeled shoes, and a little self-conscious swagger. "How I should like to sketch her; but she makes too much use of her eyes, and, ouff, the patchouli!"

"Yes, she is a shocking flirt—the beauty of the station."

"And, of course, all the young men are madly in love with her, and I don't wonder. What about my guard?"

"Oh, Vernon is not a ladies' man!" replied Mrs.

Holland evasively. "He will be coming to look for us at eleven o'clock." She laughed as she added, "And he will take good care that you don't miss *this* train! Now you shall lie down on my bed and rest, whilst I order a nice little dinner. I am so sorry Tom is not here—he will be astonished when he comes in to-morrow morning, and finds that I have eloped with you!"

Punctually at eleven o'clock Miss Arminger, now submissively resigned, took her seat in the train for Jolapett. All night long she and Mrs. Holland journeyed and talked together, arriving at the Junction soon after seven o'clock. Here a well set-up gentleman, with a prodigious white moustache, greeted his prodigal daughter with a handshake and expressive silence.

Vernon kept himself completely in the background—a detached spectator. He required no thanks, and the dread of a tip filled him with horror. He left Mrs. Holland to hand over their mutual charge, and make all the necessary explanations.

"Papa," said the girl, "so you see I've come back."

"I am glad of it, my dear; and I hope it is for good. You have given me a nice fright; otherwise there is no great harm done, not a soul knows that you tried to slip away. Lily has announced that you are confined to your room with a raging attack of neuralgia, and we will call it neuralgia for the first, and last time."

CHAPTER XIX

LEAVE had been sanctioned, and Vernon was making his modest preparations for departure—in fact the Bazaar's chief "Dirzee" was engaged overhauling his cricketing flannels, and outgrown evening suit. He

was bound for Ootacamund, where he had arranged to meet Breakspeare, who was bringing up a string of horses, including Fontenoy, entered for the Planters' Cup at Wellington Races. This would be Vernon's first visit to the hills, though he had often in his round beheld them from afar. Indeed, he had once been on duty between Madras and Mettapollium, in those humble, far-off days, when he was goods guard, and had lifted his envious eyes from the palms, pepuls and bamboos, to the breezy slopes, and the beetling heights of the famous Blue Mountains, but had never set foot on what, to him, was a promised land.

When on two previous occasions Vernon had taken a holiday it had been with Wallace, a clever young fellow who had come to grief in tea, and sought refuge in the all-embracing railway. Together they had spent a fortnight (and their savings) "doing" Agra, Cawnpore, Delhi, and the Lucknow races, and there witnessed the struggle for the "Civil Service Cup." But Wallace was dead—carried off by India's modern scourge, enteric—no one had arisen to take his place as travelling chum, and it was dull work going alone. Now Vernon had a month's leave and the prospect of Breakspeare as a companion—in so far as a popular captain in a smart cavalry regiment may share his leisure with a friendless individual who was outside the pale of cantonment society. In India, although it is called "the Paradise of the Middle Class," no middle class actually exists. People are white or black, figuratively speaking, and there is no degree of grey, no delicate intermediate shading off of the raw edges. A railway guard was without social position, and Vernon had no intention of presenting himself in a borrowed character. Yet it was with a sudden kindling of vitality that he contemplated his venture into another world. Accustomed to a monotonous, humble station, and

his remoteness from "Society," he nevertheless felt a stirring of his old self, a joyful emancipation from the obsession of the "Line," as he scribbled off the last "report," and hung up his shabby black belt.

Katty Coffey was painfully anxious that her *protégé* should have a bit of "change," see some more life, and make a good appearance. His linen, socks and flannels were mended and packed by her own clever hands, and into one corner of the battered portmanteau she had stuffed a bottle of tonic, a bottle of Elliman's Embrocation, and a flask of the hawker's most penetrating scent—in order that the poor boy's handkerchiefs should have an air of belonging—as they did —to a *real* gentleman!

When Vernon had taken leave of her, had been repeatedly kissed, and blessed, and his luggage dispatched to the station, he went to look up Gojar. Clad in a suit of new mufti (Rupees 25. See Advt.), the unexpected alteration in his appearance gave the watchman a momentary start.

"Hullo, I say! I hardly knew you," he muttered; "and so you are off, by the night mail?"

"I am—wish me luck."

"Oh, I've wished you that—and with the ring, too. I believe in it now. I wonder what your trip will be like? You will feel like Rip Van Winkle, suddenly returning to your former life from another world."

"I don't know about that, but I feel devilish uncomfortable in this new coat—too tight in the arms."

"Well, it looks all right—*il faut souffrir, etc.*"

"I expect I shall feel uncomfortable in other ways; I'm out of touch with my own sort, especially women. I had an interview with a girl the other day, a devilish unpleasant one, too, and upon my soul, Gojar, she

gave me fits—she frightened me so badly I nearly lost my head."

"Better than lose your heart," growled Gojar.

"No fear of that." Vernon's face contracted as he added. "I've done with that sort of folly, for the rest of my life."

"At six-and-twenty! Tell me another tale. You have been a most extraordinarily lucky fellow, and have had a miraculous escape, as you will realize some day."

"I begin to realize it now—a little."

"So the scar has healed in six months, eh? Ha! ha! ha! You got off cheaply!"

"I say, Gojar, now I'm going, I wish I wasn't. I funk meeting strangers. If I was starting on a shooting trip it would be all right, but Breakspeare has written and telegraphed, and made such a confounded tamasha, I am about to take the plunge."

"Sink or swim."

"Sink, with shame. I've forgotten my company manners; I don't know how to talk to a lady."

"Let her talk to you; they like it, or at least they did in my day. Just put in a word now and then to keep her going."

"Yes, that sounds all right, but, of course, I shall not be in Society, or in the way of meeting ladies. If I suddenly come upon a mob of them together, I hope I shan't find myself saying, 'Tickets, please!'"

Gojar gave one of his queer, discordant laughs.

"Society," he repeated, "what is it, after all? The men are ruled by Eton—the women by Mrs. Grundy! My boy, you must shunt the railway; forget it as if you've never heard of it. A few gallops on Ooty downs will soon sweep Tani-Kul out of your head. I give you one piece of advice: Don't play cards, don't bet. Look at me," and he thumped his

chest, "a sunken, nameless, shameless wretch, and it was cards which gave me the first shove—Poker, a capital name for a game that is connected with a hot place. I say, Vernon, will you give me your promise?"

"Yes, I will; anyway, I'm not keen on cards."

"But you are on horses and racing. Keep away from the Pari Mutuel. And now I want something else. Tell me your real name—you name in full."

"John Vernon Sacheverell-Talbot. How do you like it?"

"Talbot—Talbot of Wayne—Talbot of Turningham. I knew a Talbot in the Knightsbridge Lancers."

"He was my father; but I'm a Talbot of nowhere—and I dropped the name for reasons."

"John Sacheverell-Talbot," said Gojar, "I wonder and I puzzle over you. What is it that has turned you out of England? and why has she shut the door in your face?"

"England has nothing to say to it—it was my own family who gave me the boot. Well, time is up, Gojar—I'll send you some papers, shall I?"

"Yes; address Gojar, care of Anapillay Chetty, Tani-Kul Bazaar. And look here, my boy, you might send a line, too, if you have time."

"Oh, I'll have lots of time; such is the force of habit I know I shall be getting up at four to go on duty and that will give me a nice long day. Well, good-bye," and he held out his hand.

The night watchman came to the door of the shed; it was near daybreak, lights still twinkled in the station, but an opal tint was glimmering along the horizon. He watched with keen interest a well set-up active figure spring into a second-class carriage, whilst an eager porter undertook his luggage. Vernon greeted the guard of the Express with a thump on the back and laughed as he stood up in the window, and the

train began to move. Then catching sight of Gojar in his brown blanket, he leant out and waved to him furiously with his bran-new cap.

Yes, perhaps the sunrise towards which the young fellow was travelling might prove a good omen. His night had been pretty dark, and possibly the dawn was at hand.

It was undoubtedly agreeable to lounge as a passenger, and survey at one's ease all the familiar landmarks; to be mistaken at Arkonum for a real Sahib; to be told to "Change here for Madras, Jolapett and Trichinopoly"; and to be subsequently hailed with a certain amount of incredulity and pride! Why, Vernon looked as much at home in mufti as if he had been one of the Governor's aides, but what Governor's aide would step aside and offer his cigarette-case and all the latest Tani-Kul "gup"?

"They are all before you, Jack," announced a comrade, "the Commander-in-Chief, and Staff, the Government House party, quantities of others, and tons of luggage. We had eighteen horse-boxes on yesterday. I wish I was you now, old boy, for it's going to be piping hot here, but I would not be in your shoes on the downward trip when it's all over—I know the after-holiday feeling myself."

"Yes, that is the worst of it, my cheerful, croaking Job's comforter. However, I haven't eaten my cake —*yet*."

"Well, I hope you'll enjoy it, and that it won't disagree with you," said the other, as he slammed the door.

It was dark when the train ran into Mettapollium, and Vernon decided to put up for the night at the little hotel, and make a start first thing in the morning for Kolar, at the foot of the hills.

The new railway was in process of construction,

and the horse and pony tongas still made the steep mountain journey—with a change of animals every three miles. The horses and ponies that were employed for this traffic represented all sorts and conditions of animals; old horses, young horses, mules, ponies, animals cast for vice, broken-down racers, government casters, officers' (once proud) chargers, and ladies hacks—specimens of all these might be encountered on the Ghaut road. Here were old favourites, that their departed (to England) owners believed to have been placed in comfortable homes, sold to the Tonga Company! Here were a pair of superb brown walers, notorious runaways, now incredibly subdued, yet still capable of an occasional flare; here were backers, shiers, kickers, jibbers, as well as sundry sober, hard-working, and conscientious animals, who toiled faithfully and well. The same fate awaited all: once they came to the "Ghaut," and were placed on a certain "piece," there they remained till the end of their lives. When they got sick, or broke down, they were turned into the jungle to die.

Occasionally there were sensational scenes on the road, but rarely a bad accident, for the drivers were both capable and confident, and there were few incidents of alarming runaways, or even of tongas going over the Khud!

Vernon was extravagant; he thought so well of his own company that actually he had secured a special tonga to himself. When he had travelled about two miles up the hard zigzag road, he heard above him, on the next zigzag, a succession of piercing shrieks.

"It is nothing, Saar—it is only the white horses," announced his driver with bland indifference; "sometimes plenty bobbery making!"

The screams continued, and became so ear-splitting that Vernon jumped out, ran up the steep short cut,

climbed into the upper road, and beheld, yes, the white horses, who were "plenty bobbery making." They had backed the tonga nearly over the bank, and were executing wild rearings and plungings; the driver was cracking his whip and shouting, "Aristee! Aristee!" as well as torrents of abusive Tamil; a lady in the back seat was shrieking at the top of her voice, and several small bags, and boxes lay scattered in the dust.

In a moment, he ran to the horses' heads (they were a fresh pair and hated starting), dragged them back into the road, and held them fast, while the two passengers precipitated themselves out of the vehicle.

One was a distracted, middle-aged matron wearing a huge pith topee; the other a young girl, evidently her daughter, for she called her "Mum" as she endeavoured to soothe her.

"Oh, sir," gasped the former hysterically, "how can I ever thank you—you've saved our lives!"

"I don't think it was as serious as all that," he said. "I am glad I happened to be just behind you. These Dâk animals are generally bad at starting; they will travel all right after a bit, you will see."

"They may, but I'm not going with them. No, Mabel," turning fiercely to the girl, "I am not; I absolutely refuse to get into that thing again. No, no"—to the tonga man, now making eager invitations—"*never!*"

"But what will you do, dearest?" inquired her daughter. "You can't walk, and all uphill; it's sixteen miles to Coonoor. You *must* get into the tonga, you can't sit here."

For reply her mother, who, naturally nervous, was now shaking all over, burst into tears.

"I have it—I know what you will do," said Vernon as his eyes met those of the girl, "you shall have my

tonga; we will make an exchange. My team, a big mule and a bay pony, are a couple of lambs, and I'll take on the white pair—I'd prefer it."

"Oh, it's really most awfully good of you," replied the young lady, "isn't it, Mum? Now, you'll be all right!"

"No, it's such an awful road, such sharp corners, and other things coming down so fast—there!" as with a loud blast of a horn, the mail tonga whirled into sight and tore past them. For quite a considerable time the unhappy matron sat stubbornly on the bank, impatient of blandishments and deaf to persuasion. At last she dried her eyes, and said:

"Well, if this gentleman will really allow us to go in *his* tonga I think I might venture—but only if he is with us; I simply won't go alone."

"All right, then," he agreed, "I shall be delighted. We will put all our kit on the white horses, make your tonga a luggage-van, and travel up together."

"And you won't leave us?" pleaded the strange lady piteously; "you will stay with us, till we get into Ooty?"

"Now, mamma, how can you be so foolish?" protested the girl; "this gentleman may be stopping at Coonoor, or Wellington. Why should we inflict ourselves on him?"

"But I must inflict myself on him, if I am ever to reach Celia alive," declared her mother inflexibly.

"Madam, I assure you I shall be only too glad of your company," said Vernon. "I am going to Ooty, too. And now I will collect the parcels and load up the first tonga." This he immediately proceeded to do, and with true professional adroitness.

A few moments later, they had started, the girl in front, her mother seated beside Vernon, her eyes closely shut, one hand clutching his arm with a nervous

grip of astonishing force, the other extended on her heart.

"I know you must think I'm a perfect fool," she said without opening her eyes, "and I'm really most awfully ashamed of myself, but I've had a horrible fright, and I've a weak heart; and once I was in an appalling carriage accident—it shook my nerve for life. I am a terrible coward, where horses are concerned."

"There is not the slightest danger," he said, "and I'll look after you—I'm accustomed to horses."

At the next change, they had the good fortune to secure a quiet pair, and the lady now began to recover her self-possession. She opened her eyes, looked about her, and even began to converse.

It appeared that she and her girl were on their way to visit her married daughter in Ooty. They had spent the cold weather travelling in India and enjoyed the most delightful time, especially recently up at Bangalore.

Of course, he was going up on leave?

Yes, he was, he assented.

"And where are you stationed?" she asked.

Stationed—she had mistaken him for an officer—how flattering!

"My station is Tani-Kul," he replied after a second's hesitation.

"Tani-Kul! Tani-Kul!" she repeated. "Dear me! I seem to know the name. Where have I heard it?"

Here the left-hand tonga horse made a frantic shy at a goat on the bank, and her conversation concluded with a scream.

Between alternate fears, tremors, apologies, and intermittent talk they climbed on steadily into the cooler regions, and began to experience the indescribable change that heralds an Indian hill-station. The

steamy-hot atmosphere was left behind, with the thick Toddy palms, bananas, and dense tropical jungle; they were now in the region of mountain streams trickling stealthily through maiden-hair ferns, and the road itself was lined with shady trees, hedges of geraniums, and straggling bushes of fragrant wild roses.

Finally the last pair of ponies struggled up into Coonoor, where the travellers were welcomed by cool draughts of delicious air, flavoured with the scent of blue gums. At Coonoor Rest-house the party breakfasted together as one happy family. Released (temporarily) from the shackles of abject fear, the elder lady talked away without restraint, and as she poured out tea for Vernon, she became confidential. She and Mabel had been staying up north at Unamore with her son, a collector in the Civil Service. It was so delightful to visit her children in India and see something of their homes—only for the journey.

"Mabel, you are sneezing!" suddenly addressing the girl; "you have got a cold I am sure. *Where* did you catch it?"

"I don't know, dear; but it's nothing. Mother is so funny," she said, turning to Vernon. "Do you see she is not so much interested in the cold itself, as to where I got it? I suppose you will be at the Government House dances?"

"No, I am afraid not."

"What!" opening her eyes to their widest extent. "You don't mean to say you don't dance?"

"I am not a society man."

"Well, at any rate, you are a ladies' man," declared the matron. "You came to our rescue and I shall never forget it; those horses were just over the Khud, when you came on the scene. Coming up, too, twice you got out to help mend the harness, and lead the ponies. You have indeed, been a friend in need."

"You really make a great deal too much of what was nothing at all; I am only too glad to have been of any assistance. Here is our tonga, it's all plain sailing into Ootacamund—no steep bits of road after Wellington; and I will sit in front with the driver if it's all the same to you."

"Very well," she assented with obvious reluctance, "if anything happens, you are within reach."

As they travelled through Coonoor, which was surprisingly full of visitors, and Wellington peopled with soldiers, the young lady in the back seat talked a good deal. She was a merry, unaffected, rather pretty girl, quite one of the new school; she played hockey, cricket and tennis, ran with the beagles, and whilst undoubtedly a devoted daughter, kept her mother in order.

The young people discussed novels—they liked Merriman and Hichens—they compared notes on Delhi and Agra: all this was safe ground, and Vernon found himself managing pretty well, and committing no terrible solecisms, or even addressing his companions as "Ma'am and Miss." At last they were rattling down that long descent into Ooty which ends in Charing Cross, and the elder lady began to fumble with her handbag, and ultimately produced a card.

"Here," she said suddenly, leaning over to Vernon, "is my name—Mrs. Bertram. We shall be staying with Major Dacre at Fern Hill, and I hope we shall see a great deal of you. Only for you, I firmly believe I should never have arrived alive—and here we are. I think we go along by the lake road."

"Yes; and I," he said, "go up the hill to Silk's hotel. I will change into the luggage tonga, and send it on after you."

When a seat among the baggage had been excavated, she came round to the back of the other tonga, to say good-bye.

"Won't you tell us your name?" asked Mrs. Bertram, with a friendly smile.

"Vernon," he answered, colouring; and taking off his cap, "John Vernon."

"Now, Mr. Vernon, you will be sure to come and see us, won't you?—and come soon," as he hesitated and began to stammer out an excuse.

"You know we shall be meeting you every day!" declared the young lady with a reassuring smile. "*Au revoir.*"

Then Mrs. Bertram and her daughter were driven off waving farewells, and Vernon climbed into the waiting vehicle, and had himself carried up to Silk's hotel.

CHAPTER XX

HERE was, indeed, a new world; an airy continent high above the burning plains, chiefly inhabited by people who were riding, driving and walking, minus umbrellas and sun topees, precisely as in their native land. Overhead was a soft blue sky; all around were familiar trees, shrubs, and gardens glowing with flowers. Vernon noted all these details as he was whirled along under a sloping bank, that was a blaze of red and purple dahlias.

Silk's hotel was situated directly below the Club, and here, soon after tiffin, the new arrival received a visit from Captain Breakspeare.

"Hullo! I say," he began, "you don't look very fit—more like a boiled rag! However, you won't know yourself in a week or so. I've a capital mount for you, and you can exercise your old friend Fontenoy to your heart's content."

"Oh! so he is up too, is he?"

"Yes, he is, and everyone, and everyone's horses and dogs are up; it's going to be a ripping season. Ball at the Club where I am stopping, ball at the General's, ball at Government House, theatricals, gymkhanas, cricket, tennis tournament, polo ditto."

"I expect you'll have no end of a time, Tony."

"Yes—I'm bound to—and you, too."

"But in a different way. You can't put me up for the Club, and you don't suppose I've got the cheek to write my name at Government House—or at the chief's."

"At any rate, you can dine at the Club, and you must get into the cricket eleven—they want a couple of good men—you used to be a fast bowler, Jack. There is the gymkhana, you can compete in that—the hounds, a new draft have just arrived—you must come out three mornings a week. Oh, I don't intend to let you sit here, twiddling your thumbs, my boy."

"It would be better for you if you did; you will only get yourself into hot water. It's most awfully good of you, Tony, but you really can't foist a railway guard upon your friends."

"Certainly I can, upon some of my friends—for instance, Pascoe, he is an awfully decent chap. Look here, Jack, I intend you to enjoy yourself. I am not asking you to go the daily round, shooting in cards, or to attend balls and official 'tamashas,' but a gallop with the hounds, and a cricket match can outrage the feelings of no one; and, anyway," contemplating him reflectively, "you look all right!"

"Do I? I am relieved to hear you say so. I know I shall always be jerking my arm round for my pouch, eh? I may be useful in the gymkhana, with the flag and bell."

"Don't be an ass!" cried Captain Breakspeare im-

patiently. "I'm prepared to be your social godfather, but, I say, I can't be seen with you in that collar; the shape is obsolete. Just come down and get yourself some at Oakes'. I don't think much of your tie either —a Hawker's selection, eh?"

"It's quiet anyhow; it might have been grass green; but I'll rely on you, Tony, to bring me up to date."

"Then you must get a Panama hat, riding breeches, and an evening-dress suit."

"In short, an outfit."

"Yes, which goes down to *me*. That's understood."

"Certainly not, thank you; no, no, Tony, I can manage all right. I've a good sum in the bank, and I may as well spend it."

"Wish I could say the same! Come along, now, and as we walk down, and have the gees led after us, I want to hear about the little dark-eyed demoiselle —Mademoiselle Look and Die. How is she?"

"Oh, very fit! She is engaged to be married, to a fellow called Booth."

"Ah! is that so? Then I breathe again. She was, and I presume is, distractingly pretty, but it would never do for the likes of her to be a possible Lady Rotherham."

"Now, look here, Tony, drop that! Perry will see me out; he will be an ornament to the peerage for half a century."

"Rot!"

"Well, I mean that he is most awfully clever."

"He was just a suck—that's all—hideously ugly, too. By Jove! when he opens that great mouth of his, it seems to swallow up the rest of his features! By the way, your cousin is here."

"Cousin! Which cousin?"

"Perry's sister Linda, now the Honourable Mrs. Seymour-Wenslade."

"What! Nonsense!" coming to a standstill. "Tony, you are humbugging—joking."

"Am I, indeed? I can assure you that Mrs Seymour-Wenslade is no joke; she takes herself most seriously, and sets up for being the best dressed woman in the Presidency."

"She was always mad about that sort of thing. I suppose I was bound to come across her some day. It's just the people you don't want to see, who shove against you."

"Possibly she won't recognize you, so cheer up. She is said to be short-sighted, and does tremendous execution with a long-handled eye-glass."

"What is she like now?"

"Oh, slim and tall and drifty, with clinging draperies, and heaps of hair, and feathers."

"One would think you were describing a foxes' earth—hair and feathers. Yes—go on."

"She is vivacious, chatters a lot, and has a cheerful voice; never gets on a horse's back—a victoria and a lace parasol are about her form. She dances beautifully, smokes Egyptian cigarettes, is wild about Bridge—and a bad loser."

"And what has brought her to India?"

"My dear fellow, what brings anyone out who is not obliged to come? Ask me another. Wenslade is preposterously rich. He has gone down to the Plains to look for big game; a good chap, but a poor shot. I sincerely hope big game won't come looking for him. Meanwhile madame has a ripping time, and a delightful cottage *ornée* at the other side of the lake. She gives popular luncheon and Bridge parties, and is generally in enormous request. At present, Mrs. Seymour-Wenslade is in seclusion—measles—rather an unromantic ailment for a smart woman!"

"I am surprised that a smart woman would own

to such a thing. She ought to have called it 'Carditis,' or 'Cigarettitis,' and Linda was always clever at making believe."

"Ah!" ejaculated his companion. "So you know her little foibles. Well, there is no make-believe about Wenslade's money. He has tons of it—and here we are."

After the visit to the outfitters' and the library, the new-comer was carried to the tennis ground invested in a specially selected collar, and tie and a new Panama hat. He, however, implored his companion not to introduce him to anyone, and stood aloof in silence, whilst Captain Breakspeare talked to many acquaintances, or was hailed by his men friends. Vernon, as he listened to the jargon, and endeavoured to become accustomed to a once familiar entourage, ventured to assure himself that every eye was *not* fastened upon him; that he "looked" all right, and that people were not noticing his rough hands, nor finding him anything out of the common.

That same night he dined at the Club, and wore a new dinner coat, and a black tie, and with Breakspeare and Pascoe as his companions, he felt more or less at home. People had received him with uncritical friendliness. It was a cheery meal. Here were planters who had ridden in from their tea and coffee estates, officials and civilians up on leave. All around there was a buzz of drill, leave, tea, tigers, polo, cricket and racing.

"You don't often sit down to a dinner like this in your diggings, Jack, do you?" said his friend, as he sent for a second helping of "Club" mutton.

"Dinner," repeated the stranger, "I should say not. We never dine in Tani-Kul; we merely feed. I'm not greedy, but I confess that I am rather tired of goat, and Brinjals, and egg curry."

Vernon recognized his enemy who had travelled without the Persian greyhounds, bragging loudly about elephants and discoursing of Travancore, the Kundas, beaters, and "heads."

"Who is he?" he inquired of Captain Breakspeare.

"Oh, Sir Granville Boggin. He has been out on a big shoot. Why do you ask? Does he strike you as particularly attractive?"

"Oh, Lord, no! I merely ask, because in my official capacity he and I had a row over two dogs he wanted to travel in the carriage with him. He ought to have been in the dog-box himself."

"Well, he *is* a bit of a cur. I know the animals—nice gentlemanly fellows—Persian greyhounds. He brought them up, and offered them to a certain young lady. And how did the row end?"

"I hauled out the dogs at the last moment, and he left, looking apoplectic, shaking his fist, and swearing he would smash me. I've seen him glancing over this way once or twice. Will he shy a plate at me?"

"Oh, no; he will never spot you, or dream that you'd be up here, and have the incredible impudence to sit at the same table with him. His grandfather had a small shop in Portsmouth. His father was a clever mechanic, and a decent sort who got on, made a pile, and was created a Baronet. This is the son—a nice specimen! He has the most deadly contempt for the class from which he comes. He is always trying to do the right thing, and doing the wrong one, and he is paying his addresses to a girl who simply won't look at him, though he has thirty thousand a year and a new forty-horse power six-cylinder Napier motor, especially built for India."

"A howling cad!" put in Pascoe. "He thrashes his native servants, kicks his dogs, and knocks his horses about. Come along, don't waste your breath

talking of him. Let us go into the billiard-room and play pool—four annas a life."

* * * * * *

The next morning Captain Breakspeare took Vernon for his first gallop on the downs. Oh, the joy of riding over the springy short turf in the cool mountain air! What a contrast to the bad going, the sticky cotton soil, and the scorching winds at Tani-Kul. A number of other people were also making the most of the climate, and the hour, riding in couples, or parties, all over the far spreading grass. On their way home Captain Breakspeare and his friend overtook a leisurely group, consisting of five men and two ladies; one of these proved to be the heroine of Tani-Kul railway station. How different she looked now, sitting a well-bred black waler, with the ease of one accustomed to the saddle. Vernon noticed her curving lips, with mischievous corners. A Terai hat was pulled far over her beautiful laughing eyes; her whole appearance breathed an air of radiant contentment with her present lot. At her right hand rode her father; on her left, two young fellows, who appeared to be competing for her attention. Close behind came Miss Bertram, also escorted by a couple of cavaliers. The parties joined forces for a moment.

"Good-morning, Colonel," said the Lancer officer. "Good-morning, Beatrice. Capital going, isn't it? ground just perfect."

"Perfect," she promptly agreed; then she glanced at Captain Breakspeare's companion, the individual who was riding Fontenoy, and equally good looking, and well groomed—a slight young man, in irreproachable riding-kit. A second glance, their eyes met, and she recognized—no, was it possible?—the guard of the train at Tani-Kul! How well he rode! how collected

his air! Yes, it was he; he had said that he knew Tony. This encounter was really most embarrassing; she felt her face flame; only for this self-possessed young man, she would now be in England. Of course, she must acknowledge this gentleman guard, and she accorded him a grave little bow. Miss Bertram, for her part, gave him a charming smile, and said:

"I told you that we should meet, Mr. Vernon—did I not?"

"Yes," he stammered. "It was—a—a happy prophecy—for me."

The men looked at him. Who was this strange chap, who appeared to know both the ladies? But Breakspeare, with a general farewell, signed to his companion, and cantered on ahead.

"I say, how did you scrape acquaintance with Miss Bertram?" he inquired.

"Coming up in the tonga." And in a few words Vernon related the incident.

"She is Mrs. Dacre's sister. Mrs. Dacre is an uncommonly pretty woman, and awfully popular. Since you have done the knight-errant business for her mother, you are bound to be invited there."

"They did ask me to call, but, of course, I'm not going within a mile of the place. Fancy meeting them again, when I was on my rounds, and saying, 'All tickets ready!'"

"Don't, Jack. Drop the line—drop it!"

"And that was Miss Arminger on the black horse. She recognized me, and bowed."

"She did; and she blushed—the blush of guilty shame, I was glad to observe. She must have been a good deal staggered to see *you*."

"I suppose she was. Is she often given to these excursions and alarms?"

"No, she's a capital sort. I've known Beatrice

since she was in socks. She is a kind of cousin of mine, and is tremendously admired out here. She has a ripping figure, rides and dances like a bird—well, of course, a bird does not ride or dance, but you know what I mean—and has no nonsense about her, or, anyway, not much. You were a brick the way you caught and returned her. I knew we could depend on you, Jack."

"It was the most awful job I ever had to face. I hope you will never let me in for such another. I tell you, when she found I had allowed her to miss her train, she turned and withered me. I declare my knees shook, and I was on the point of crawling under the waiting-room table."

"Stuff! You're not afraid of anyone—man, woman or child. Why, it's in your face!"

"I am glad of that, and I hope it will intimidate people; but I am terrified of Miss Arminger. Next time she runs away, you must get some other fellow to stand in her way."

"Oh, though she's a bit impulsive, she'll never bolt again, make your mind easy. You see her father, Colonel Arminger, the gentleman with the big moustache, is Inspector of Remounts out here. Bee is his only child—came out last September. There is a step-mother, a pretty little wisp of a thing, a widow, who landed old Arminger at the Durbar, and married the Colonel about twelve months ago, to the pain and grief of Bee. Everyone was surprised at the match; however, it has turned out all right. The only criticism made, is, that Mrs. Arminger seems in such a desperate hurry to transplant the girl. I suppose two is company, three is trumpery, and Arminger is a most devoted and indulgent parent. But Miss Beatrice don't see it; at least, 'she sees the snare, and she retires.' Am I quoting from Tennyson? Bee is a young woman with a will of her own."

"She is—I can answer for that."

"All the same, she is one of the nicest girls in the world. You may swear by her, she is so 'pucka,' and real—and——"

"And the future Mrs. Breakspeare."

"Good Lord, no!" and Captain Breakspeare burst into a hearty laugh. "I'm too fond of Bee ever to fall in love with her; besides, we would never agree. I'm not strong enough to hold her. Sir Granville Boggin is crazy about her, chiefly, I think, because he cannot understand any sane spinster showing the cold shoulder to thirty thousand a year. He is filled with amazement, indignation, and determination. Well, you will see the whole show at the gymkhana this afternoon. Come, we must be jogging on."

CHAPTER XXI

THE polo-ground at Ooty presented an animated scene that afternoon, everyone who was anyone was there; all the big people, heads of departments, officials, officers on leave, old Residents (or "Todas") of twenty years, strangers and recent arrivals like Vernon, who could count their stay by hours. A double row of carriages was drawn up outside the rails; smart, well-docked ponies were being walked to and fro, and the band of the Madras Volunteer Guards was playing "La Paloma."

Captain Breakspeare boldly approached a circle of ladies—complacent in their newest Europe frocks—but the railway guard hung back, whilst his companion chatted to the wife of his commanding officer. Seated close to her, Vernon descried his friend of the tonga, who with a gracious wave of her white-gloved hand summoned him to approach.

"Oh, Mr. Vernon," she said, "I am delighted to see you—I do so want to introduce you to my daughter—Mrs. Dacre."

Here a pretty young woman, who sat beside her, smiled and bowed and said:

"I hear you were so good to Mamma. She has been telling us of her adventures, and how you pulled those horrid horses out of the bank, when the tonga was slipping over. Mamma declares she will *walk* down, or go in a bullock coach—no more tongas on the Ghaut for her. Will you come and lunch with us to-morrow? Sunday—such a day for lunch here—lunch and a walk—tiffin at two o'clock sharp."

"I am sure you are very kind," he was stammering, when the lady interrupted him, confident that her invitation would be accepted.

"I see you are a friend of Captain Breakspeare's—I will try and get hold of him too."

"Oh, but really, Mrs. Dacre," stammered Vernon, desperately embarrassed, "it is most awfully good of you, but—but——"

"Yes, I know you have not called in due form! But I am not a great stickler for etiquette; time enough when my husband is a Colonel," and she gave a significant glance at her particular horror, the consort of the Colonel of the Lancers. "Look here, Captain Breakspeare," she continued, "you will come to lunch to-morrow, won't you, and bring your friend, Mr. Vernon?"

Captain Breakspeare, momentarily at a loss, hesitated for a second.

"Now, you are both trying to invent another engagement!" declared this lively hostess.

"No, indeed we are not," protested Captain Breakspeare, "we accept with great pleasure."

After all, why not? *He* had not introduced Jack,

who was one of the best-looking fellows on the ground, and appeared to be what he was, well-born, and if Jack's family chose to throw him out into the world to find his feet, and his bread, he felt a firm conviction that Jack had done nothing shady, nothing to forfeit the grand old name of "gentleman;" if it was a case of a girl, there might be a sort of complication—but with Mrs. Dacre, and her mother, it was all right!

A carefully made-up elderly woman, with a fair wig and a small wrinkled face, raised her glasses and scanned the two friends with inquisitive, searching eyes as they moved away.

"Pray who is the young man with Captain Breakspeare?" she asked in a shrill falsetto; "somehow his face seems familiar to me."

"I really don't know," replied Mrs. Dacre. "Mother picked him up, or rather he picked her up, on the Ghaut—he is good-looking, is he not, but seems painfully shy."

"Is the young man with Captain Breakspeare one of the Paladin officers?" inquired the wizened lady, suddenly leaning over, and accosting the Colonel's wife.

"No, dear Lady Southminster, I've never seen him before."

"I'm sure *I* have," she muttered, "but where?"

"Possibly he is a young civilian, or one of the Mudlarkers from Madras. Captain Breakspeare has a most varied circle of acquaintance; wherever he goes he appears to stumble on some old friend."

Meanwhile the Gymkhana was progressing satisfactorily; the Mathematical Affinity Stakes were in progress. A gentleman had to ride to a lady, and hand her an envelope containing a little sum in arithmetic, the solution of which she returned to her partner, who then finished round the course. The race afforded much malicious amusement, for though the problem

was simple, many competitors transported the wrong answer! Mr. Pascoe, eventually galloped in with the correct one, smartly worked out by his nominator, Miss Bertram. The Bullock Rekla race proved wildly exciting; of the fifteen starters, fourteen went off the course, in various directions, and Captain Breakspeare, who patiently made his way with good-tempered determination, though the last to arrive, being the only one who passed the posts, was declared the triumphant winner. A dog race followed. As there were twenty eager entries, the handicapping proved a serious matter and required the closest and most careful attention. Hounds, fox terriers, spaniels, and even pugs competed. The stakes eventually were carried off by "Boots," Mrs. Dacre's black poodle, who won by an ear, amidst yells of enthusiasm and applause.

By the time this race was over, Captain Breakspeare declared that he really must have some exercise, and he and Vernon went in search of their horses.

As the two men were riding off the ground, a large landau dashed up to the gate, with fine bay steppers and gorgeous men-servants; the carriage contained a slim, rather faded woman with blonde hair and a wonderful feathered hat, a girl in white and, sitting on the back seat, a man with a red shiny face. It was the Arminger turn-out.

Captain Breakspeare raised his hat to the ladies.

"What! surely you are not going away already?" protested Mrs. Arminger, with a piteous expression.

"Yes, you are so fashionably late. I'm sorry it has happened so, but we want to give my young horse a breather round Cockey's Course."

"I say, Tony," said Vernon, as they trotted along the lake road, "how dared you let me in for that tiffin to-morrow?"

"Sorry, old man—I really could not help it—Mrs

Dacre was so deadly keen on having you, and after all, the family are your friends. If you will assist distressed females, you must accept the consequences!"

"But once I begin, I'm bound to go on. Mrs. Bertram has launched me, and I'll meet a lot more to-morrow. My acquaintance will grow like a snowball, and I'll get to know people I've no business to associate with—I'm just an earthen pot knocking about among brass ones, and I'm safe to be smashed up—it's a mere question of time! I declare, Tony, if you don't mind, I'll go down to Coonoor, where I can lie low."

"I should mind very much. Pray who is going to exercise Fontenoy? Don't be an ass—take whatever comes in your way."

"But it is not honourable, or playing the game, to go to people's houses under false pretences, and a false name."

"I only hope Mrs. Dacre has never entertained anyone less honourable than yourself, Jack."

"All the same, I think I will drop her a line and tell her *who* I am."

"Don't you do any such thing," cried his friend, "you are pledged now. What harm can one tiffin do you? and if there is a shindy later on, well, I'll stand in with you and take my share. For the present, let us enjoy this good bit of grass—when we come to the turn over there, you can let out Fontenoy for all he is worth."

Later, as the two men rode home over the downs Vernon returned to the previous subject.

"Look here, Tony—listen—about going down to Coonoor."

"No, I won't listen to a word."

"But I shall be handier for the Wellington course—it's only two miles from Coonoor—I had a look at it as we passed, it is rather awkward with those corners

by the road. Let me take over Fontenoy and keep him, train him, and get him accustomed to the course, you know very well it's half the battle."

"No," doggedly, "I want you to stay in Ooty, remain you must."

"And I particularly want to move on—for," and Vernon reined up his horse, "unless I am greatly mistaken—and I am not—I am positive that there are two people here who have recognized me."

Captain Breakspeare also pulled up sharply, and stared at his companion.

"One as Vernon the guard—the other as John Vernon Talbot."

"Men?"

"No, an old and a young woman."

"Oh, the devil! and who are they?"

"Miss Arminger."

"Yes, that's of course. Beatrice does not count—she will never give you away, she is not *that* sort—and if she were—you have a secret of hers—a nice little Roland for her Oliver. Who is the other?"

"There are, in fact, two others. I noticed a girl in a green dress staring at me hard, and doing her level best to recall *where* she had seen me?—in short to locate me. I remember her perfectly—her tea-basket took fire, and I had the mischief's own work to put it out—yes, and her too, her dress caught. It was a mercy the whole train was not in a blaze."

"Oh, she only sees a resemblance. I know the girl you mean, Miss Grahame—her sister is an officer's wife in Wellington. She is not often here, and if you should make acquaintance—avoid the subject of fires. Well, and who is number three, and I'll dispose of her too, in double quick time!"

"I am not so sure of that. She is Lady Southminster—my god-mother."

"Good Lord, you don't say so! However, she only recognizes you as Jack Talbot—the other fellow, a railway guard, is unknown to her—so that's all right."

"Yes, but supposing she begins to talk to me as Jack Talbot—what am I to do, with the name of Vernon?"

"That's a poser! There is only one thing for it. You must give her a wide berth, she is staying at Government House, so you won't see much of her—dinner parties and Bridge are her line—she is not an outdoor lady. She is a gambler—nothing less than rupee points—I absolutely refuse to play with her, though she is extraordinarily good for a woman, and gets more out of a poor hand than anyone I know. How long is it since you have met?"

"Six years. I saw her staring at me through her glasses."

"Admiring you, perhaps!"

"No, bar chaff—this is a serious business. Her ladyship was always down on me as a boy—she will be down on me now like tons of bricks, and she'll write home that she has discovered the family black sheep."

"I can swear you are not that, Jack, though you never told me the real reason of the shake up. I have always kept an open mind. The family gave out that it was your debts, and your incorrigible idleness, that drove your uncle to colonize you, and there you have the matter in a nutshell."

"Well, Tony, I may tell you this much, it was neither one nor the other, and there you have the matter in a nutshell! Perhaps Lady Southminster will pour the whole story into your ears—no doubt she would like to give me a shove down, if she could."

"I shall meet her to-night—I am dining at Government House, a Burra Khana."

"Oh, then she is bound to get hold of you, and ask you a hundred questions about me. Now I should like to know what you propose to tell her?"

"You may trust me to be cautious—my mother was Scotch."

"But give me some idea of what you propose to say?"

"I shall not tell her that we were school-fellows—I'll say you are 'on the railway,' that's nice and vague! Honestly, Jack, I'll be most discreet. I'll seem to tell her a great deal, and I'll reveal absolutely nothing, that sort of thing is rather my forte, and I have always felt confident that I was born to be an ornament to the diplomatic service, yet here I am, going round stables, and attending boards on butchers' meat! You'll find that I'll put the old dowager well off the scent; but I'll leave you to square the young ladies yourself. Hullo, I see two syces waiting at the gate, so we must be a bit behind time," and with a farewell gesture Tony cantered up to the Club.

In a hired "fitton" gharry—the day being Sunday—Captain Breakspeare and his friend arrived at the Dacres' house in fairly good time; it was a large bungalow, surrounded by well-kept grounds, situated on the further side from the Club and high above the lake.

A considerable number of vehicles were already standing under the trees, and among them they recognized the Armingers' blue landau.

"Now I know you'd like to cut and run," said Captain Breakspeare, "but you must go in, and put a bold face on it," and he alighted as he spoke, and stepped up into the cool English-looking hall, with windows commanding a wonderful flower garden, and the sloping downs.

The company were assembled in the drawing-room, about eighteen in all, Colonel, Mrs. and Miss Arminger,

Captain Woodcock, A.D.C., Major Davies, Military Secretary, Count and Countess Le Vallon, French travellers of distinction, a couple of pretty married women, an M.P. and an artist.

The hostess gave the new-comers a cordial welcome; she looked charming in white, and turning to a lady in a mauve gown and a feathered hat, said:

"Mrs. Arminger, may I introduce Mr. Vernon—a friend of Captain Breakspeare?"

Mrs. Arminger smiled graciously and murmured:

"Delightful weather, is it not? I suppose you have just come up?"

He bowed.

"On first leave, of course?"

"First leave—yes——" his tone was doubtful.

"Is it your first visit to the hills?"

"I am sorry to say that it is."

"Yes, is it not enchanting? Have you been long in this country?"

"Yes—some years."

Vernon glanced at Miss Arminger standing a little aloof, a grave-faced listener to this conversation. At any rate he had told nothing but the truth so far—but how long could he continue to do so?

"How do you like India?"

"Oh, there are worse places," he replied.

"And where are you stationed?" pursued his tormentor. Mercifully for him there was now a move, the host came forward to conduct Mrs. Arminger into lunch, and Vernon fell back with an inward gasp of relief. What an ordeal! to have to stand prominently in the middle of a company, and be cross-questioned by this sharp-eyed lady. He had felt her eyes travelling all over him, from his hair to his boots.

As they were marshalled into their places, one of the pretty married women fell to his share; he sat

between her and Miss Bertram, and almost exactly opposite Miss Arminger—who looked extremely handsome in a large black hat, with roses in her white gown. The table was decorated with long lines or banks of flowers, the appointments, the dishes, the company, might have been imported direct from home. And here was Vernon, chief guard, sitting among them, a rough, unpolished fellow who had not seen a fish-knife, or a menu card for six long years. Nevertheless he soon began to feel the stirring effect of familiar associations.

Presently the pretty little lady, Mrs. Grassendale, proceeded to draw out her companion (she had a mouth turned up at the corners, perfect eyes, and a seductive dimple).

How long had he been in Ooty? Did he act? Would he not take part in the piece they were getting up—they wanted a young man so badly—he really must. What! not even if *she* asked him? Was he interested in plays? Had he seen this, that and the other at home? For her part, she adored the theatres.

Vernon was obliged to confess that he had not been in London for years.

"Heavens! I go home regularly every March for three months, to see my kiddies, the theatres, and dressmakers, and generally play about! What was the last piece you saw?"

"The last piece." He considered. "*A Pantomime Rehearsal.*" (At Tani-Kul.)

"What—that thing! Why, it's absolutely as old as the hills;" and raising her voice, she added, "May I ask where you have buried yourself?"

At this moment he met Miss Arminger's eye, and coloured to his hair.

"Of course you are coming to the ball on Thursday at Government House?" pursued the lively matron.

"No, I think not."

"Well, you are absolutely too funny for words! You neither act nor dance. Don't you think you will find Ooty just a wee bit dull?"

"No, I like riding, and I hope I shall get some cricket."

"Oh, now I remember. I saw you riding a perfect darling of a bay horse. Do lend it to me some afternoon? What—you won't!" and she laughed. "I see the 'no' in your eye, but you must absolutely say yes. I am one of the people who never take *no*."

"If he were mine, I should say yes—but, he belongs to Captain Breakspeare."

"But he is much too fat to ride it himself; it would absolutely be cruelty to animals—of course he will lend it to me—and I shall ask him. What are you going to do to-day? *C'est le dimanche*—here, as on the Continent, an excuse for various irregularities."

"I don't know, I shall follow my leader."

"Not a bad game! Tell me, do you think it wrong to play tennis on Sunday?"

"No, certainly not."

"Or to go for a walk—Noah's Ark style?"

"Er—it depends on the partner."

"Ah!" with a glance of amusement, "to play Bridge?"

"I don't play cards—even on week days."

"Oh, Lor'! where have you been raised? I see they are moving—I'm absolutely dying for my smoke!" and she laughed; "am I not a dazzling revelation? Well, Rip Van Winkle, I am the new young woman—I belong to three clubs, I can drive a motor, and have a latch-key—now!" and she walked on ahead, looking back to see if he was following. He was very good-looking, and so shy!

But the lady, as he stood momentarily irresolute,

was instantly pounced on and escorted into the verandah by an appreciative A.D.C.

Subsequently, when most of the company had settled down in the garden to coffee and cigarettes, Mrs. Bertram came and talked to Vernon; she was a warm-hearted, motherly person, and he was not afraid of any questions that she might ask him. She looked remarkably elegant and restful in a clinging black crêpe-de-chine, so different to the whimpering and dishevelled figure, with a tear-streaked dirty face, under a toad-stool topee, he had found by the side of the Ghaut road. As they were discussing the various expeditions possible from Ooty Captain Breakspeare came up, and said:

"Awfully sorry to disturb you, Jack, but to keep down your weight, I must carry you off, and see that you have some exercise. He," turning to Mrs. Bertram, "is riding my horses in Wellington races, and a number of people are going for the usual Sunday constitutional to visit the Kennels. Mrs. Bertram, I wonder if you could be persuaded to join us—only two miles across the downs."

"No, no." Mrs. Bertram could not be persuaded. She smiled and shook her head and said, "A walk of two miles there, means two miles back, and is beyond my powers." (Secretly she was thinking that she would take a siesta in a tea-gown, in her own room, and enjoy a new book.)

Vernon found it a little difficult to escape from Mrs. Bertram; many were the "last words" she particularly wished to say to him, and desired to know when she would see him again? What evening would he come and dine with them quietly?

At last he was released, but only to perceive that the walking party had already started—apparently he had been forgotten.

"Perhaps it is just as well," he reflected. There was less chance of his making some awful blunder, and giving himself away. As he strolled slowly down the avenue he heard a scatter of gravel and a pattering behind him; with stretching bounds and ecstatic yelps the two Persian greyhounds flew by, evidently delighted at being set at large.

Someone with quick light footsteps was evidently hurrying after the dogs. When Vernon reached the gate he looked back and discovered that the someone was Miss Arminger.

CHAPTER XXII

As Vernon held the gate open their eyes met, and the young lady coloured faintly.

"We have never been formally introduced to one another," she said; "but, of course, you know my name is Arminger—Beatrice Arminger."

"And mine is Vernon," he returned, "John Vernon." Then as she looked at him with her wonderful grey eyes, it seemed as if something in their expression suddenly melted the ice of his ordinary reserve, and he added: "At least, that is the name I go by out here."

"Then it is not your own?" she said, surveying him with astonishment.

"Well, only partly."

"Shall we walk on?" she suggested. "The others have a long start. I went to fetch the dogs and I was delayed."

"You must have thought it rather strange to find *me* among the company," he began abruptly as they moved forward in the wake of two long grey streaks which were shooting up a hill. Miss Arminger hesitated a moment.

"Certainly, it was a little unexpected. Pray, how did you manage it?"

"I took leave to the hills, because my friend Captain Breakspeare happens to be up too. I am afraid seeing us together gives people a wrong impression. I hate to appear to be sailing under false colours."

"But are you?" she asked impulsively. "I should say not," and again she surveyed him with the unquenchable candour of her grey eyes.

"You are very good," he answered stiffly. "I am, as you know, just a railway guard on furlough, and am sitting at people's tables as an equal when my proper place is the servants' hall—or out here—the back verandah."

"How do you come to know the Dacres?" she inquired. "I suppose Tony brought you?"

"Not altogether. Strange as it may sound, Mrs. and Miss Bertram are my acquaintances. We travelled up together, and Mrs. Dacre invited me here on the strength of this. I wanted to send over a chit with an excuse, but Breakspeare would not hear of it. I wish to go down to Coonoor, but he will not allow that either. You see, at Coonoor I know no one."

"And no one knows you," supplemented Miss Arminger. "Here no one shares your secret except Tony and myself, and you may trust me to keep it safely. You have a secret of mine," and she coloured, "so we shall be quits."

"I suppose that little excursion remains unsuspected?" he said.

"Oh, I should hope so?" she answered in an altered voice. "It would be really awful if it were to be made public property. People would say and think such things," and a wave of colour suffused her face. "No one knows except father, Mrs. Arminger, Tony and you.

I heard Mrs. Bertram call you her 'preserver.' Of course, that was only in joke, but you saved me in real earnest from making a frightful mistake; and though I was furious then, I am deeply grateful to you now."

Vernon walked on, absently whirling his Annamulley cane, and wondering what on earth he was to say. He was an awful duffer, and felt painfully provoked and humiliated by his own limitations; he was tongue-tied.

"You know I was nearly crazy, and extremely rude to you," she resumed.

"Oh, please don't," he protested; "*don't!*"

"But I must really speak now that I have the opportunity. I hope you will forgive me for my shocking rudeness. I said you had been bribed. I feel hot when I think of it. When I am in a passion I say things that make me miserable for months."

"I beg you won't even think of Tani-Kul again," he said. "It was well you did not go on. I suppose you realize that now, Miss Arminger?"

"Yes, it would have been such a worry to father, who could not get away at an hour's notice, and poor dear old Grannie would have been at her wits' end. I see it all now; but rage is blind, and I *was* in a rage."

"I thought it was Love that was blind?" he corrected.

"Oh, well, both," she agreed, with a laugh. "I had a scene with Mrs. Arminger, and was beside myself, and in a fury packed a bag—I generally do things on the spur of the moment—gathered up some money, got a Chokra to fetch me a gharry, and was off to the station. Of course, the little wretch ran and told, 'Missy done gone!'" and she threw out her hands expressively. "And now since we know one another's most deadly secrets, and have entered into a mutual defensive alliance, I must tell you that in my quarrel

with Mrs. Arminger—she wants me to call her 'Lily,' but I forget—*I* was in the wrong."

"Were you? Mothers-in-law and step-mothers have a bad name," said Vernon.

"Yes, I was jealous, because nearly all my life father had belonged to me."

Vernon made no attempt to speak. He recalled Gojar's advice: "Let the women talk to you; they like it." Already this handsome, amazing girl had boldly confessed herself, and told him that she was both hot-tempered, and jealous.

"And then sometimes Lily and I do not care for the same people, and we had a rather heated argument about those dogs. Was it not funny? They were given to me, and really are beauties, and I do love dogs; but——" and she grew rather pink. "Well, Mrs. Arminger accepted them," she went on; "and, at least, they are in the family, so it is all right. Bader and Azuf, come here, and be presented to this gentleman."

With graceful bounds the pair came undulating towards her, and laid their pointed noses in her hands.

"What wonderful long, grey, silken ears, are they not?' she said, holding out a specimen for his inspection. "Their faces are like black velvet shoes."

"Yes; these greyhounds are valuable, and worth almost their weight in rupees. Certainly a magnificent couple—dogs that might attend a king. I have seen them before."

"You have?" pushing the dogs gently aside. "It seems to me, you have seen everything before!"

"It was merely in my official capacity as guard. I had a heated argument with their former master. He insisted on taking them, without tickets, too, in a first-class carriage. Did he not mention the insolent brute who dragged his dogs out on the platform at Jolapett Junction?"

"Yes, indeed he did. He sent in a formal complaint, and asked the Company——" she laughed.

"For his blood—oh, yes! I noticed the individual at the Club the night I arrived. I don't think he recognized me; at any rate, I hope he did not."

"He is away now, shooting in Travancore with Captain Wenslade."

"Do you know the Wenslades?" he inquired, after a momentary hesitation.

"Yes, she is rather a friend of mine. Her bungalow, the Dove Cot, is next to ours, and I see her almost every day through the window. She is laid up just now with measles. I came out in the same cabin with her on board ship—in fact, she was my chaperon. Father and Lord Rotherham have known one another all their lives, and she is Lord Rotherham's daughter. There is something disgraceful in a grown-up having measles. Thank goodness I had them when I was in pinafores. I go and visit Mrs. Wenslade and tell her all that is going on. She is so fond of society, and finds it deadly dull being in quarantine."

"I suppose she is a good deal older than you are?"

"I wonder why you should think so? But she is ten years older. I am twenty-one. I loved being nineteen, and wanted to stick there for six years, but my family said they would give me away! You were at school with Tony, were you not?" she asked suddenly.

"How do you know?"

"Quite simply; he told me. Is this *another* secret?"

"To all but you."

"Dear me! what a mystery you are!" she exclaimed with a laugh. "I should like to guess you," she added audaciously. "May I?"

"You may try, if you please, but you will soon give me up. I am a hopelessly dull subject."

"Wait and see. I think you are about twenty-six. Tony is twenty-eight. You and he were in the same school—in the same Militia training——"

Vernon suddenly came to a full stop.

"Yes. Tony has let out several kittens! But I am safe, and it really was due to me, that I should know something of the guard whom I had obeyed so implicitly. I am sure as a schoolboy you were a pickle. And please don't hate me for saying it, but when you were older, you got into some scrape—not a wicked scrape—and——" she coloured. "Oh, Mr. Vernon, you listen so well, that I am drawn on to saying too much."

They had not moved a step; the two dogs, exhausted, were extended panting beside them.

"Not too much, Miss Arminger. Do you know that, as the children say, you are getting quite warm. Yes, it is true, that I was something of a pickle. I was not idle, only stupid—a fearful duffer. I got into a scrape six years ago, and as you have been so frank with me, and I feel you are to be trusted, and—and—well, it's years since anyone seemed to care a rap what happened to me—and as you have eyes just the colour of my dead mother's, I will tell you something I've never breathed to a soul in India."

"Oh, thank you!" she murmured, with a slight falter of embarrassment.

"The scrape was not mine. I was driven into the wilderness as the scapegoat of another person. I had no more to do with the actual business, than you had yourself."

She remained silent for a moment, and seemed to await further explanation. As none was forthcoming, she asked impulsively:

"But who drove you out?"

"All my family. Oh, no, not my father and mother; of course, they are dead. I was brought up by an uncle, who did not care tuppence about me. He looked on me as a born slacker, too fond of hunting and sport, and I failed twice for the Army—that was my worst offence. The other was a different matter—in short, *theft*. I was promptly transported to the Cape, with a second-class passage and a cheque for twenty-five pounds—a modern ne'er-do-well."

"Knowing your innocence! *I* should have fought, and fought, and fought for my good name."

"It would not have been of the slightest use; it was merely my word against very suspicious circumstances. I could not clear myself, and the other who *knew*, remained dumb."

"I should have made him own up—yes, I would."

"I don't think you could," he answered resolutely. "The other, who is responsible for my—well—disgrace—happens to be a woman."

"Oh—a woman!" echoed the girl, with a quick heightening of colour.

"Yes, and a relation. She has prospered and flourished like a green bay-tree, and possibly in the long run, a life of hard work has been the best thing for me."

"How philosophical! Do your people know what has become of you?"

"No. I suppose they think I am dead—wrecked, sunken, gone to the bottom. I've heard nothing of them since I left England six years ago."

"Shall you ever go back?"

"No. I told my uncle I'd never return till I was sent for, and up to the present——"

"But how *can* he send for you," she interrupted, "when he does not know your whereabouts, or even if you are alive?"

"That is true," he admitted, after a pause of reflection. "All the same, even if he had my name and address, he will never lift a finger to recall me."

"And you can bear this?" she exclaimed. "You made no struggle?"

"You see, I was poor—a mere boy, barely twenty-one, and circumstances were too strong for me. Perhaps, if it were to happen *now*——"

"Yes," she interposed, "now it would be different, for my experience is that you are stronger than circumstances. Oh, Mr. Vernon, I do feel so very, very sorry for you!" As she looked at him gravely, her glance seemed full of a sympathy that longed to express itself in a torrent of words.

"Thank you, Miss Arminger. I had no idea when I met you to-day, that within a couple of hours I should be telling you my affairs. Something I cannot exactly define, made me open my mouth for once, to one who was herself so frank, and so sympathetic."

"And if anything ever happens, you will let me know, won't you? Promise!"

"Yes, I promise." Vernon was a reserved man, but, like many reserved people, if once he showed himself as he was, he would continue to be singularly frank.

"I suppose you have never said anything to Mary Holland?"

"No, never, though she and I are sworn friends."

"Nor to that pretty little dark girl?" she added audaciously.

Vernon coloured. He recalled Rosita's eagerly-parted lips, her eloquent eyes, the intoxicating flattery of that hour in the reading-room when she endeavoured to force his confidence. And now he had given it to this stranger almost unasked. But there was something so gloriously frank, so intensely compelling in her black-fringed eyes. All the same, he was a little

ashamed of his spontaneous burst of confidence. Had he not been a fool to talk so much of himself?

"The little dark girl is lovely," continued Miss Arminger; "almost like a Spaniard, and quite startlingly handsome."

"Yes, you mean Rosita Fontaine. No, I've never spoken of my life at home to any soul but you—no, never."

"What, not even to Tony?"

As he shook his head, she made an incredulous gesture.

"How extraordinary! But you will tell him, won't you—some day—soon?"

"Perhaps."

"And Miss Fontaine—is she not considered a remarkable beauty?"

"Yes; she is engaged, and is getting her trousseau."

"And will she marry, and settle down in that place?"

"She will marry—yes; and I hope she will settle down." The tone of his voice—which was dubious—made her look at him interrogatively.

"You speak as if you did not like her; or is it simply because you think one should never praise one girl to another?"

"No, no. I do think Rosita beautiful. Who could help that?"

During this prolonged and, to them, absorbing conversation, the pair had entirely forgotten the proposed visit to the Kennels, and were suddenly called to attention by a loud shout from Captain Breakspeare.

"Hullo, Vernon," he cried, "where are you off to? *Not* Pykara waterfall to-day! This way, please—*this* way to see the hounds."

"It was too stupid of me," said Miss Arminger apologetically. "I never looked where we were going,

and we started late. You know I had to fetch the dogs."

"So I see the young lady has taken pity on your shy friend," remarked Mrs. Grassendale to Captain Breakspeare. "Shyness has an extraordinary attraction for some people. At lunch I did my poor little best to draw him out, but he has not two ideas in his head—really not *two!*"

And one of these was not Mrs. Grassendale, said her companion to himself.

CHAPTER XXIII

"WELL, Jack, I see you contrived to have a fairly long *tête-à-tête* with Beatrice Arminger," said Captain Breakspeare, as they sat smoking in the Club verandah after dinner. "Was she pitching into you?—or what?"

"Oh, no. I merely ventured to explain how I came to be in society so much above my position and deserts, and assured her that I was thinking of retiring to Coonoor."

"And what did she say to that? Did she urge you to go?" and Tony Breakspeare's eyes twinkled.

"No, I don't think she did exactly."

"Then you have made it all right with her, eh?"

"I suppose so."

"Last night I had a tremendous field-day with Lady Southminster. She had been nursing her suspicions, and, by George! she tackled me after dinner like an old terrier that smells a rat. First of all, she complimented me upon your appearance—really quite a good-looking boy! Which regiment? A brother officer? No. Had I known you long? For some

time—yes. India? Yes—an Indian acquaintance. She worried and worried round; she figuratively scratched and sniffed, and for her pains only got some civil chaff. Then she showed her teeth."

"Oh, did she!" muttered Vernon. "As well as I can remember they are false."

"She informed me that you bore a remarkable resemblance to an unfortunate young ne'er-do-well, her godson, whose truly shocking conduct had disgraced his family, and broken his uncle's heart. Shall I go on?"

"Oh, go on, by all means. Did she mention any of his crimes?"

"Yes—idleness, waste of opportunity, a craze for horseflesh, racing, low company and betting. All this was bad enough, but in order to pay his debts, he stole and sold some of the family heirlooms. His uncle did not prosecute him, of course. He did the washing at home, and sent the young profligate out of the country. This was nearly seven years ago. They have lost sight of him since, but your appearance most painfully recalls his memory."

"Did she confide his name?"

"Yes. She gave it to him herself, as she held him at the font. You have heard the story, Jack?"

"Why, of course. It's my own story, Tony, and it is partly true."

"A very small part of it, I'll bet my life!"

"I've never talked of that hideous time, and tried to put it out of my head," said Vernon, suddenly sitting erect in his chair. "Somehow the mere recollection of it seems to throw me into a sort of fever—a kind of helpless rage, that is frantic to get at Fate and do it a deadly mischief. Formerly, when I let my mind dwell on things, I would lie awake all night long, nearly mad with utterly useless fury, to think how I'd lost

my place in life, my career—for I *would* have scraped in at the third go—my friends, even my name!" He paused, got up, flung his cigar into the verandah, and then resumed his seat. "You know, Tony, how densely stupid I was in some things. Work as I would, I never could get the hang of mathematics, and a little duffer like Blobbs, who never made a run, and fielded like an old woman, was an easy first in class. It was not rank idleness with me, it was sheer inborn incapacity, a shortage of brain power, not enough head of steam. And you know what my old home was, and the change, and how my uncle disliked me. I suppose he could not help it. Maybe I'd done him some bad turn in a previous existence. Well, I failed, and he was furious, and loaded me with reproaches. On the top of this, I had the bad luck to let down his tame cob—the only animal he ever mounted—so I was sufficiently in disgrace, when the last item was booked to me—theft."

There was a silence.

"I need scarcely tell you that I had no more to do with it than the Club cat, but circumstances were against me. I got the credit of the business. There was a powerful dramatic scene, and I was given a short shrift. I was not suffered to pollute the air of my native country, and was commanded to drop my name, and, in fact, go to the devil, by means of a second-class to Cape Town. As long as I live, I shall never forget my journey down to the boat, that wet November day, in charge of my uncle's man of business. He was grim as death, a sort of gaoler, but I made no effort to escape. I really was too stunned to care. Well"—sitting down as he spoke—"here I am, you see."

"What about your other relations—your mother's people?"

"They never got a chance of interfering. I was

packed off before they knew, and my uncle had it all his own way. The family are cravenly afraid of him, and 'give a dog a bad name——' I had rather a poor character, and was supposed to be wild and idle."

"If I'd been you, I'd have stood my ground, and fought it out."

"Yes, that is what Miss Arminger says."

"Miss Arminger! Good Lord, Jack, do you mean to say you've told *her?*"

Captain Breakspeare's face expressed not merely astonishment, but the liveliest annoyance.

"Well, yes, I have, and she is the only person except yourself that I've ever spoken to on the subject."

"But look here! I can't make it out. Why, you never laid eyes on her until yesterday."

"You forget that I met her under rather painful circumstances at Tani-Kul."

"Oh, by George! yes. And I suppose another secret, more or less, does not matter! And so that was what made the pair of you dawdle behind. I never thought you were soft and susceptible."

"But I am not," said Vernon, flaring up. "You ask Miss Arminger if I am soft, and don't look and talk in this way, my good Tony. You don't suppose that I am such a silly ass as to raise my eyes to the daughter of a Colonel—a Colonel, too, who is the friend of my uncle. But the young lady and I have an unusual bond. She knows that I, Jack Vernon, am a jackdaw in borrowed plumes, and *I* know that she once ran away from home. She was apologizing to me to-day for certain candid remarks she made to me, and she knew that you and I were school-fellows. I expect you must have drawn a flattering picture of *me*, for she was so sympathetic, and—I can't exactly explain—you know what I mean—that before I knew what I was doing, I told her what I've just told you.

You must bear in mind, too, how many years it is since any English lady has exhibited the smallest interest in me or my concerns, and I daresay the sudden shock turned my head; which is not much of a head at the best."

"I daresay it did, for undoubtedly Bee has a way with her, and you are not the only sufferer by a long, long string. Well, Jack, I suppose I felt a little sore, that you should confide in a comparative stranger, whilst an old chum like myself was left out in the cold. I think the whole thing is a most abominable scandal. Why could you not speak?"

"No good. Besides, I'd promised someone to hold my tongue."

"I can't think how you stood the life!"

"Neither can I sometimes; but the open air, lots of work, plain fare, cricket and tennis, and a few days' shooting now and again, have kept me going."

"You are over the worst now, old man. I'll do my best to give you a leg up. It is a great mercy you did not marry—with such a blank life, no belongings, no interest, never a line from home. I know you are a strong, self-centred chap, but I am amazed at your escape."

"I am surprised, too," he answered thoughtfully.

Should he tell the tale of his infatuation? Well, no, not just now.

"And talking of people being interested in you, Jack—several of my Bangalore friends who have seen us together have asked me to bring you to call."

"Very kind of them, Tony, but, for one thing, I've no cards. I suppose 'Mr. John Vernon, Head Guard, Tani-Kul Junction,' would make them stare, and I have made up my mind to lie low. I shall pay no visits, accept no invitations, never sit at anyone's table. I made a mistake in going with you to-day. I think

I'll tell Mrs. Bertram who I am. She is a kind, motherly soul. What do you say?"

"That you'd soon have it all over the place. She will tell her girl, her girl will tell twelve others. No, no, you don't; and I see no reason why you can't join in the Assembly hops, and go to the theatre."

"But I do. I don't wish to be 'spotted.' Linda is here, and so is Lady Southminster. If I am recognized, they will write home. I should hate to be brought under *that* focus again. I have lots of pleasure without society, a string band and smart women. Your company, old Tony, and the splendid gallops on the downs, thanks to you, and now and then a game of cricket and billiards, this fine air and comfortable quarters. I am doing myself splendidly."

"You have a six weeks' leave."

"Yes, I don't want to think of it. It will fly only too fast."

"To me it would seem like quitting Paradise, for the infernal regions."

"Not quite. There are worse places, and lots of people I like in old Tani-Kul."

"The Wellington Races will be coming off. You ride Grand Slam and Fontenoy, and you must get an extension; but I've a great scheme for keeping you up here altogether. How would you like to go into coffee?"

"Coffee?" repeated Vernon, taking his cheroot out of his mouth and staring at his companion.

"Yes, as sub-manager. Rather an intelligent idea, eh? I've been sounding a planter I know, a very decent, gentlemanly chap."

"No, no, Tony; thank you most awfully. I know nothing of estate work, and coolies, and accounts. For the present, I will stick to my van and flag."

"Well, that remains to be seen," said Captain

Breakspeare rising. "And now, Jack, if you are coming to the meet to-morrow, at the fifth milestone on the Avalanche Road; it's past twelve o'clock. Get off to your bed."

During the weeks which followed this conversation Vernon enjoyed many a good day's sport on Ooty Downs. He never missed a day, and was one of the best men with the hounds, but he kept to his determination, and never accompanied his friend when he sallied forth to balls, dinner-parties, or even gymkhanas. Consequently, he saw nothing of his cousin or his godmother, and society saw nothing of him. He galloped and exercised Captain Breakspeare's two entries for the Wellington Meeting on the Hobart Park Racecourse. He explored the surrounding hills and sholas, and had a little shooting on a planter's estate. Then there were cricket matches, and altogether his time was most agreeably occupied.

And Miss Arminger?

She was a regular follower, accompanied by her sporting parent, and a first-rate horsewoman. To watch her sailing away at the tail of the hounds, and boldly flying down breakneck slopes on her well-bred black, was indeed a delight to all judges of fine riding. After a long morning on the breezy uplands the air of the blue hills seemed to have a wonderful effect in producing exhilaration of spirits. Miss Arminger and Vernon would often ride home together—sometimes the distance ran into many miles—whilst her father and his friend and Master discussed hounds, horses, and the morning's sport.

Beatrice Arminger, endowed with a feminine love of mystery and a fair share of curiosity, was genuinely interested in Tony's friend. He had captivated her fancy, and the fact of his having imparted his story to her alone, not only flattered her self-respect, but

subsidized her heart! She invested Vernon in as many fine qualities as if he were a knight of romance. He was young, he was good-looking; he exhibited considerable self-reliance, and great force of character, rode magnificently, and had expressive eyes. Are not all these items but the natural equipment of a hero—and a lover?

He never again alluded to himself in all their friendly *tête-à-tête* afield. He now talked to her with ease; there was no trace of embarrassment in his manner. They discussed the approaching races, the approaching tennis tournament; they exchanged stories, riddles, opinions, but no further confidences on his side ever passed between them.

"Why do you never show anywhere?" she asked one day. "Never come to a ball or a dinner? You know we have invited you several times, though you have never called, which Lily thinks so very peculiar; but, of course, you could not make *us* the exception."

"You know the reason, Miss Arminger," he replied. "I am not going anywhere; it would be awful cheek if I did. I am only a railway servant—a guard on leave from his post."

She glanced at him as he rode beside her. To her he looked precisely like other young men in his neat riding kit, sitting at ease on his shining, pulling bay. Who would suppose that she had seen him wearing the white drill suit of a guard, and that he had actually punched her ticket in the most business-like fashion? Beatrice was uneasily conscious that her interest in her companion had gone deep; that the wet mornings, when her father flatly refused to face the cold, driving rain that swept across the hills, and they were absent from the meet, were, indeed, to her blank days.

Surely it was the height of contrariness—yes, and imbecility—that she should find much to attract her

in a railway servant—this discarded branch of a great family, penniless, but for his modest earnings, and turn with shuddering repulsion from Sir Granville Boggin, who offered her a title, an enormous income, and—himself. Colonel Arminger was not well off. Lily was, in a way, very extravagant, and had more than once intimated that "if anything happens to your father, Bee, darling, you will have exactly one hundred and fifty pounds a year, you know, darling."

Hill air is said to promote love affairs. It is even affirmed that few young couples who make a mountain expedition descend entirely heart-whole! Beatrice Arminger and Vernon had undoubtedly felt the spell of the keen and invigorating draughts they drew from the bosom of the blue mountains. The black waler and bay thoroughbred were never very far apart from one another on the downs. They might almost be said to "hunt in couples." But, luckily for Beatrice Arminger, there was no gossip, for if English hunting has been unkindly summed up as "galloping, gossip, and gates," there are neither gates nor gossip on the Neilgherry uplands, where treacherous green bogs and precipitous hillsides offer few facilities for society on wheels. No dowagers ventured beyond the meet, and most of the followers had their own amusement well in view.

One never-to-be-forgotten morning the hounds met at Andy's Plantation, picked up a line almost at once, hunted slowly until they reached the saddle above Limerick Shola, where they settled down to the scent in real earnest, and ran at a tremendous pace toward Emerald Valley. Here half the hounds took another line at racing speed, and turned across a treacherous bog, where several of the field got in deep, but the bay thoroughbred and black Australian skimmed over the bad crossing, and, with Verasawmy, one of the whips,

were the sole followers of half the pack. The six leading couples ran on at a tremendous pace, and eventually pulled down their Jack in the open, after a splendid gallop of nine miles.

Vernon, well accustomed to hounds, retrieved the brush, and ultimately assisted Verasawmy to collect the pack. The morning was magnificently fine, and the young people, as they rode side by side, were sensible of a feeling of buoyancy which seemed to lift and swing them above the world at their feet. After discussing the recent run, and commenting on their comrades' misadventures and great loss, they gradually fell into a sort of intimate silence—a silence which seemed a part of the general harmony and glow of existence. Beatrice was tasting one of those rare moments of absolute happiness, that in the morning of life raise one into Heaven.

"What did it mean?" she wondered. "Why did she feel so exalted and exhilarated? Was it owing to the spell of a perfect climate, the scent of pines, the enchanting glimpses of dim blue plains, faintly visible through a veil of heat haze in the clefts between forest-clad hills? Was it merely that she was young and healthy, and her blood was still tingling from the late rousing gallop, or, was it because she was riding beside John Vernon? and they two were for this one exquisite hour alone in a world apart?" Beatrice had no definite feelings by which to test the quality of her sensations, but it was possible that she was in love? What was love? Was it love when the presence of one individual meant everything—the absence of all the world became a matter of indifference, if not relief?

And Vernon, too, was sensible of the quicker beat of life. Although his bearing was so cool and collected, he was inwardly throbbing with a rush of thoughts. For a long time, he had been alive to the charm of his

present companion. To his starved existence her sympathy proved intoxicating. She was frank, yet modest; she made gay little speeches, with an air of audacity. But as she glanced at him from under the rim of her terai hat, the eyes that spoke to his were clear and transparent as the two windows of a pure soul.

He listened greedily to her confidences, her sharply-drawn pictures of home—a busy country life with Grannie, and Grannie's village, and the schools, her "girls' evenings," at the Manor, her occupations, charities, and rather limited horizon. "So different to this," she declared. "But there one felt one was doing a little good, and helping other people who led such dull, sunless lives. There is nothing of that sort required out here."

"No," he said to himself. What of his sunless life, and all the good she could do *him?* But alas! Miss Arminger was as far beyond his reach as the North Star.

Well, supposing, for the sake of argument, that she cared for him? How dared he suppose it, even in his inmost thoughts? He was of good birth and character. He could work hard, and was sure of promotion, and Fortune's wheel might turn. Meanwhile, could he invite this princess, who had many suitors at her feet, to share a three-roomed "quarter," with brick floors, become the wife of a subordinate on the railway, and associate with Madame Tanzy and Mrs. de Castro?

Faint heart never won fair lady. Should he try? He had relinquished so much without a struggle, that it had become a life habit. Oh, if Beatrice would but wait! She was kind, she suffered him to ride beside her, she talked to him freely, she pitied him—had she not said so? Was Pity akin to—anything else? No you maniac, cried an angry inward voice; you may

pity a lost dog and give it a crust, but you don't love it—do you? you idiot! Miss Arminger pities you, and gives you a crust, her smiles and her company—that's all, and words which were burning on Vernon's lips were choked back.

Such an occasion was never likely to occur twice—a two hours' *tête-à-tête* with Beatrice Arminger. There was not a soul in sight but Verasawmy, the whip, jogging ahead, in his stained red coat, with a dozen hounds at his horse's heels. A Spanish proverb declares that "God cannot help a man who despises Opportunity," and here was a noble stone, which descended to pave the lower regions. The couple rode along in silence, each seemingly engrossed with their own thoughts. Perhaps telepathy was kind to them; perhaps they had a conviction that their hearts were too full for words, and that speech was superfluous.

* * * * * *

After an involuntary visit to the Arminger establishment Vernon felt sincerely thankful that he had not allowed his tongue to get the better of him that heavenly morning on the downs. Meeting Colonel Arminger and his daughter close to their home one afternoon, they invited him to tea. He could not decline, it was just four o'clock. His sluggish imagination failed to suggest a plausible engagement, and, therefore, he succumbed to temptation, and followed his host and hostess into the well-appointed bungalow. As he passed through the hall and anteroom, Vernon noticed the well-drilled servants, the fine trophies—silver-mounted arms and priceless Oriental rugs. In the drawing-room they found the dainty châtelaine dressed in muslin (a Paris model), busily presiding over a George the Second tea equipage. She paused, astonished.

"This *is* an honour!" she exclaimed, with a radiant smile, as she offered the new-comer two jewelled fingers. "So pleased to see you."

Vernon speedily realized that all his surroundings betokened refined, and even extravagant tastes. Why the very cup in his hand had cost as much as his month's pay: Mrs. Arminger herself looked supremely expensive.

Mrs. Arminger had taken a fancy to this young man who kept so conspicuously aloof from society. He really was most presentable, and in his riding kit looked like the smart young sportsmen one meets at home in a big country house. She plied him with sweet cakes, and sweet little questions, talked eloquently of the delights of *her* side of India—the Punjaub—and made no secret of her hearty contempt for benighted Madras.

"Yet, by all accounts, your hills are not up to these," said Vernon. "And I hear, when you dine out, you don't go in a brougham, but are carried in a box. When people stay with friends they take their own bedding. I don't call that exactly civilized. Anyway, we are the oldest colony; we conquered India. *Madre Dios*—Madras—the Mother of God, is the mother of Anglo-India, though some of her children treat her with scorn!"

"Dear me, you are eloquent! Well, granting your great age, the delicious ices at the Madras Club, and good cooks, you cannot say much for your red dust, white ants, bandicoots, and your railway, can you?"

Beatrice Arminger looked a little nervous, and before the visitor could frame an answer, she interposed.

"Lily, I want to show Mr. Vernon the Pater's sketches in the writing-room. He knows all the views so well. Oh," with a start, "here is Sir Granville back already! I see his motor," and she instantly effected her escape, beckoning to Vernon to follow. Framed in the library

were numerous clever water-colour drawings which Miss Arminger exhibited with filial pride—Pykara Falls, Pir Put Mund, the Droog, Tiger Hill, Coonoor, and "The Avalanche."

"But I thought Sir Granville was shooting?" remarked the guest inconsequently.

"Much too great a fag! He has returned to see about the training of his horses for Wellington races. He has sent us up quite a stack of horns."

"Bought?"

"Well, Daddy says they are *dead* ones the natives find in the jungle and sell; but, of course, we would not think of looking a gift Sambur in the horn."

"Who is your neighbour in the pretty bungalow," he asked, "almost in your grounds?"

"Mrs. Wenslade. She often runs in and out—her husband is still away shooting; he really *is* keen! By the way, we are having a picnic next week up Dodabetta, and you must come. I really will be seriously offended, and so will Daddy, if you decline. It is to be small and select, only about twenty. We are to drive to the foot and climb to a plateau, and have tiffin. The mountain sides are lovely now the blue flower is out; you know it only blooms once in seven years. Well?"

"Well, Miss Arminger, I accept with pleasure."

"Twelve o'clock at Charing Cross on Monday. Do not send an excuse at the last moment like certain *blasé* young men."

"Oh, Beatrice, darling," said her step-mother, rustling in as she spoke, "Sir Granville is here, and wants to see you most particularly. It is something about his racing colours. He wishes you to choose them; he says you have such taste."

"Old gold with red facings, I should suggest," muttered Vernon *sotto voce*, and then, as if ashamed of his malicious remark, he took his departure.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE annual hunt breakfast was ever one of the most popular features of the Ootacamund season; here were entertained at the Club, not only the hard-riding members of the chase, the fitful followers, the shirkers—these never quitted the road—but also a considerable contingent of ladies and gentlemen who rarely attended any meet, and never were seen in the saddle.

On the present occasion a vast multitude had assembled on horseback, in carriages, and afoot, in and around the Club-house. The breakfast was over; it had been an excellent repast, leisurely, genial, and without friction. All the "Rankest" or senior ladies, had received their due meed of attention, and now people were preening themselves preparatory to being focussed in the inevitable group, which was to be taken on the Club steps.

Mrs. Seymour-Wenslade did not hunt, she never got on the back of a horse, nevertheless she possessed a Busvine habit of the latest fashion and cut, which fitted her like the traditional glove, and flattered her slim figure. On the morning of the hunt breakfast, invested in this garment, a suitable hat and white hunting tie, she was chief among the celebrities who attended the function.

As there was an unexpected delay with regard to the photographic plates, she put her arm within that of Beatrice Arminger, who was in *bonâ-fide* hunting trim, and led her aside to a remote corner of the verandah.

"I do think this waiting such a bore!" she grumbled; "but as it happens so, I will improve the occasion. Beatrice, Mrs. Arminger has been worrying me to talk

to you about Sir Granville Boggin. Now *do* please listen to me," seating herself as she spoke, and feeling for her cigarette-case.

"I don't want to listen," the girl answered deliberately. "Imagine giving up my own pretty name and walking into a room after such a horror as 'Boggin!'"

"But you would be walking after thirty thousand a year!"

"No, indeed; the money bags would have to walk after me."

"Well, I'd be the Duchess of Demonville for a big income. My dear girl, money means so much in these days—rank, brains, beauty are *nothing* without it."

"I know that money means a great deal to *you*, Linda."

"Yes, I confess that it stands for a good time—and I do enjoy a good time."

"And also lovely clothes, and furs, and diamonds, cigarettes, and maids and motors."

"That is true—I like to be able to order, order, order, and never count the cost. To see other women staring and glaring at my lace, sables, and pearls—I call *that* having a good time, and I've known what it was to have a bad one. Oh, my dear, such a dull, strict home, no end of questions and worries, and but little money. My father says it is a sin to give sixty guineas for a dress."

"So do I," said Beatrice; "I quite agree with him."

"Well, for my part, I am no believer in beauty unadorned. Smart men think so much of a woman being well turned out; in fact, they refuse to be seen with dowdy or shabby females."

"My dear Linda, you are neither dowdy nor shabby, and no doubt you have your heart's desire."

"So—so——" blowing a cloud of smoke through her delicate nostrils—"Herbert is awfully good, and quite an old dear. Another girl ran me very close. Oh, I can laugh now; but it was an anxious time—I beat her by a neck—a low neck, and a new frock. Herbert told me so! So much for clothes, you see. *Vive la toilette!* The frock in question was a perfect *dream* in blue and silver. I have the rags of it still; it cost a little fortune. I confess I am rather lucky—lucky at Bridge, and at racing. Yes, I generally get all I want, but even so, life is dull and tiresome and a grind. Sometimes, when I have neuralgia, and it's a wet day, I ask myself what *is* the good of it all?"

"But why, when you have everything?" asked Beatrice. "Linda, you really are insatiable. It is wrong—it is wicked to be so thankless; think of others."

"Oh, my dear, I never do that! Enough to do to think of myself, and Bertie. Bertie is so tiresome sometimes, trying on cholera belts and sampling fever mixtures, and taking his temperature. Here, he fusses about his health; at home, he fusses about his tenants and responsibilities, and his mother—such an odious old creature, with a mouth like a mussel, and a sharp tongue. His sisters with thin high noses, and thin high voices—and opinions—we have them all at Christmas, and it's too ghastly for words: early to bed, early to rise, no smoking, no gambling; politics and gardening, village nurses and roses, the sole topics. They are much too well bred for paltry gossip, which might be spicy and amusing. I generally pretend I have a bad chill and remain in my room. After their departure, I give myself a week at Claridge's to recover my mental equilibrium. Yes, I do loathe the 'in-laws.' Don't marry any man but an orphan—a wealthy orphan—*bien entendu*."

"I do not intend to marry at all!" rejoined Beatrice with decision. "And pray, what of your own 'laws'?"

"Oh, they never leave home on visits—so scared of strange beds, and strange cooks. And my ways are not theirs. I'm too lax; I never get up for breakfast, and I smoke. We go there once a year for the hunt ball, and I give mother a thimble now and then, but we really have *nothing* in common. They don't pretend to march with the times—not even Perry—and I'd like to see anyone hustle the Pater—you might as well try to move a cathedral. I'm a little afraid of him even now; he can play the stern Roman father to the life, yes, with a vengeance. When he is in one of his rages, the castle is shaken to the cellars, and the very dogs hide. Once on a time he had hopes of *me*, and tried to cultivate my mind, but gave it up when he found I had none. No, I'm not the least intellectual, as you may have noticed. I am thoroughly mundane! I say, who is the woman in the awful white gown, with a black edge like a memoriam card?"

"It's Mrs. Bruce-Lascelles; I know she's coming to bore you about Bridge—and I'm off."

A little later, when the verandah was crowded, Vernon found himself close to a lady who was the centre of a noisy group—a tall, fair woman with an exaggerated manner, and a perfectly-fitting habit. She was talking to Colonel Arminger in a high penetrating voice, and just as she uttered the words, "I simply *howled* with laughter!" a movement in the throng caused her to turn. She and Vernon were face to face, and he discovered that the woman with the loud voice was his cousin Linda! Her fluffy hair was a shade darker, her chin a shade fuller, the droop in her left eyelid was unchanged—most people thought it delightfully piquant. Vernon was momentarily startled, but not,

as was Linda, totally unprepared for the encounter. He looked her sternly in the face for as long as one could count four. Yes, it was the same face that had betrayed him at the crisis of his life. Mrs. Wenslade's complexion suddenly became a bluey-white, her mouth trembled, her eyelid drooped despondently as she was confronted by the cousin she had ruined. She quailed before the intense directness of his glance, and her relief was profound when he hastily turned about, and moved away.

"Why, what is the matter?" inquired Colonel Arminger, who was full of solicitude. "Dear lady, you are not going to faint, I hope?"

"No, no; I am only a little bit giddy. I'll just go inside, and sit down. Please send me Beatrice—she was here a moment ago—it's really nothing—a slight touch of the sun. Dear Colonel Arminger, don't mind *me*, but look for Beatrice," and Mrs. Wenslade entered the now deserted Club anteroom.

In a very short time, Beatrice hurried in breathless.

"What is it?" she asked. "Daddy is in such a frantic state. Are you ill? He sent me flying to you."

"I only want to ask you a question," said Mrs. Wenslade, rising, and going towards a window; "merely to ask a name. Do you see the man down there talking to Mr. Pascoe—now—looking this way—who is he?"

"That! Why, it's only Mr. Vernon—surely you know him by sight?"

"Vernon—no; though I've heard of him often—especially from you—I've never seen him before."

"And is that why you sent for me?" said Beatrice. "Father seemed to think it was almost a matter of life and death," and she laughed. "You remind me of the young man who invited a girl to accompany him

into a conservatory, and it was merely to inquire where the Smiths got their brown bread ? "

" What idiotic nonsense ! " exclaimed the lady with a gesture of irritation. " But *who* is this Vernon ? "

" Something on the railway—he never goes out anywhere. Why are you so interested ? "

" Simply because he is the living image of a cousin of mine—rather a wild, good-for-nothing fellow—who may be somewhere knocking about the Colonies. We know nothing of his whereabouts ; in fact there was an idea that he had died of enteric at Durban ! "

" You seem quite upset by this likeness," said the girl with ready sympathy. " Were you fond of him, Linda ? "

" I—oh, good gracious, no ! Has this young man been long in India ? "

" Yes, I think so—and listen—listen, they are calling us for the group. Come along, Linda, they have kept a good place for you right bang in the middle."

" Oh, I don't want to be taken," she protested in a peevish voice ; " I really don't—no, no ! "

" Why, you know you put on that habit, because you said it would come out so well. Come along, come along," and Mrs. Wenslade was hurried away in spite of herself, and subsequently, by a curious and awkward coincidence, found that she had been placed close to Mr. Vernon—that brilliant member of the Ooty hunt.

Yes, he was her cousin, she was now certain of the fact as he sat on a step directly below her ; he had the Talbot ear, small, finely-cut, and set close to his head. If he were to accost her, she would scream. " No, no," urged common-sense, she would politely assure him, that she had never seen him in her life before !

However, Vernon did not tax either Mrs. Wenslade's nerves or her veracity ; he melted away into the crowd as soon as the photographer said :

"*That* will do, thank you!"

It was the day of the picnic up Dodabetta, and Captain Breakspeare and two companions rode together to the rendezvous. As they descended the hill, Sir Granville's motor swept by. He was seated in it with two ladies, Mrs. and Miss Arminger.

"A fine Napier car," remarked Mr. Pascoe. "I wonder if Miss Arminger will own it yet."

"No, no; she does not care a snap for anyone, or anyone's car," said her cousin. "I never saw a young lady who was so impartial in her attentions. But the baronet is a formidable admirer, and Mrs. Arminger is uncommonly strong; perhaps she will carry it through—she is good at engineering things."

"I should have thought Miss Arminger would have a say," said Vernon.

"She had her say once, and there was a cyclone that carried her as far as Tani-Kul Junction. The Colonel condones that escapade, and Mrs. Arminger was very 'amiable,' and I believe the girl gave a sort of half-promise to 'think of it.' Meanwhile Sir Granville has been away a good deal, in order to give her time to test the old adage, 'Absence makes the heart grow fonder.'"

"I don't believe in that," said Vernon, recalling Rosita and himself—Rosita now absolutely forgotten.

"Pooh! What can you know about it?" scoffed his friend. "Well, at any rate, it has got into the air that there is an engagement coming off. Ooty expects to be fed up with at least a couple of big weddings in the season. Personally, I don't think Beatrice will marry just money; I have a better opinion of her than that, though I must confess she is in his car nearly every afternoon, and Lady Southminster, who knows the Armingers intimately, gave it out as a *fact*."

The last words brought them to the rendezvous, where about forty people had assembled. The start

was made, and soon the entire cavalcade was in motion. Vernon did not venture to attach himself to anyone, he preferred to lag behind with his own thoughts. He surveyed the crowd from a distance, and was relieved to note that his cousin was not among it. But this recent piece of news seemed to take the heart out of everything, "And honestly," demanded a pitiless little inward voice, "why should you object, *you* could never marry Beatrice Arminger!"

The glimpse of her luxurious home had driven this sword into his heart. To think of her as his future wife was a piece of pure folly, of wild, impudent presumption. Beatrice living on two hundred rupees a month, and patronized by Mrs. Sharratt and Mrs. Beard! How dared he? Well, he would insist on going to Coonoor, and training from there. After all, he was his own master. He would pack his portmanteau, pay his bill, and ride over without delay—and then Breakspeare's expostulations would arrive too late.

There were for him three women too many in Ooty: Lady Southminster—so far harmless—Linda, and Beatrice. To behold Beatrice the affianced wife of that odious, shiny-faced little bounder would be unendurable. It was evidently his rôle in life to stand aside, and see others endowed with *his* heart's desire. At least, he would make the most of this one day—his last in Ooty—and if he had a chance of a word with Miss Arminger, it would be something to carry away with him into those dark hours that were assuredly approaching.

The blue flower from which the hills are said to derive their name, was in full bloom. It grew on rough, large bushes, and like a delicate mantle, covered the mountain sides as far as the eye could reach. The day was lovely, the sky opalescent with a hundred

shifting colours; the eye wandered over the blue hillsides to the far-away valleys, and the dim line of azure plains, that seemed to belong to another world.

When the real hard climbing commenced, Vernon went to the assistance of Mrs. Bertram, and helped her up to the plateau, where servants had arranged a substantial tiffin. Here people sat round in congenial groups, a right merry gathering. Vernon was unacquainted with any ladies, except the Bertrams and Armingers, but he made himself useful, and noticed that Pascoe and little Miss Bertram appeared to appreciate one another's society. He also observed that the baronet favoured him with a special amount of attention, but he took care never to trust himself within speaking distance of his *bête noire*. After lunch there were stories, guessing games, and a few songs, and then people began to scatter, and to continue the ascent. Mrs. Arminger carried off Sir Granville, and seemed to engage him in earnest conversation, and Vernon and Mr. Pascoe, both being for the moment unattached, rambled about together. The views had been so clear, and exquisite, that some enterprising folk were clambering to the summit in order that they might look over towards Wellington, and the leonine head of "the Droog."

"Hullo, it's going to be a wet evening!" announced Mr. Pascoe. "See! in other places the clouds come down; here they are coming up—and coming fast, too!"

In the extraordinary brief space of time common to high latitudes, a grey mist arose, and gradually enveloped the mountain, in a cold wet sheet. Involved in this, the two men groped about, and presently found themselves wandering like a couple of lost sheep.

"I declare I feel inclined to say 'baa,'" remarked Mr. Pascoe after long and fagging exertions. "I wish

little Bo-Peep would find—— Hark! What is that? Bo-Peep, I hope."

Nearer to them in the fog, came a murmur of voices, and suddenly two figures loomed out of the haze—Miss Bertram and Miss Arminger—also lost. After a little mutual commiseration, the latter and Vernon paired off together—quite as a matter of course.

"Is it not awful, this mist and rain?" she said. "Who would have thought of such a lovely afternoon, turning into a heavy storm. Do listen to all the little streams running like gutters, and pretending they are rivers!"

"Yes, it's a bad break."

"And I've heard such a character of Dodabetta—of people being lost in the clouds, wandering about all night, and turning up more dead than alive, in Wellington—or even Khotagherry."

"I hope we shall not be as unfortunate as that," he said. "If you will trust yourself to me, I think I can promise I'll get you back into Ootacamund to-night, in time for dinner."

"Will you!" and she laughed; "in time for supper at any rate. Here comes the rain. Oh!"—as a stinging wind beat suddenly in her face. "How we shall be drenched; and it is getting so dark, and so slippery. There! I was nearly down! I wonder where Mrs. Arminger and Sir Granville can be?"

"They are all right, no doubt. I think they hung about somewhere near the lunch."

"You speak as if they had stayed behind to devour the scraps."

"At any rate they will take care of one another. Miss Arminger, you were nearly down; would you mind holding my hand—I've no stick or umbrella to offer you."

"No; I shall be thankful to hold something. I've

such silly high heels, and if I were to sprain my ankle —think of it—you'd have to carry me; and I weigh nine stone—you never could do it."

"Yes, I could, I'm much stronger than I look."

Without demur or affectation she held out her hand —the one which grasped it was a little hard, but it felt both strong and reliable.

As Vernon, in the evening gloom, piloted her cautiously over the slippery grass and stones she said:

"Sir Granville was asking who you were? and what you were in?"

"I feel deeply honoured by his kind inquiries."

"I told him you were in the Guards—wasn't it naughty of me?—and he said he did not believe it; it was some mistake—how could you get *leave* out here?"

"I was told something about him to-day, Miss Arminger," here Vernon involuntarily tightened his grip, and held her hand as in a vice, "and you."

"Dear me; was it anything nice?"

"For him—yes."

"What?" she asked sharply.

"That you were going to marry him!"

"Marry Sir Granville," suddenly twisting her fingers out of his, and coming to a standstill. "How dared anyone say so?"

"Then it is not the case—at present?"

"No; nor ever will be. I cannot imagine why people should suppose such nonsense."

"I imagine they all know his wishes pretty well—and he is very rich. You really had better take my hand again."

If he might only keep it for his own—if he might even kiss it!

For a long time, an expressively long time, not a word was spoken; the storm increased, the rain poured

steadily, their situation had become precarious. But Vernon had a cool head, and a steady nerve. The stimulus of responsibility acted on his efforts; step by step, he conducted his companion down slippery descents, and across boulder and watercourse. At last they seemed to be reaching the lower slopes; through the mist they could hear voices shouting and calling in the distance.

"I say, I hope I have not offended you, Miss Arminger, asking about Sir Granville?" he said abruptly. "You must remember that I am not very polished or conventional, and I have a faculty for saying the wrong thing."

"I am not the least bit offended, Mr. Vernon," she answered; and her voice trembled a little as she added, "I will even make you a confidence, and tell you another secret. Ah! here are people coming with carriage lamps! What awful sights we must all be!"

"And the secret—tell me quickly."

"It is this—please keep it. I shall never marry anyone."

"What!" and Vernon gave a queer, unsteady laugh. "Oh, nonsense!"

"No." And by the light of an approaching lamp he could now distinguish her face; her eyes, as she released her hand, and looked into his gravely. "Because the only man I would marry—will never ask me—to—to—be his wife." A dull colour rose to Vernon's cheek—he was about to speak——

"Hullo! Hullo, Beatrice!" shouted an anxious parent. "Oh, I say, come, what a relief! I was afraid you were lost. I suppose you are both drowned."

"I suppose everyone else is drowned too," rejoined Vernon with amazing self-possession.

"Yes; and at least a dozen have not reported themselves. Well, you must hurry down, I'll take charge of my daughter. And now, Vernon, get home as fast as you can, and change into dry clothes. I am obliged to you for looking after my little girl. By Jove!" as with a brief farewell the young man disappeared into the gloom, "now that I think of it, Bee, it's not the first time that friend of Tony Breakspeare's, has come to your rescue, eh?"

But strange to say for once Beatrice, the ready-tongued, made no reply.

CHAPTER XXV

How Vernon made his way back to his hotel that evening he never quite remembered; he changed, snatched a hurried meal, and galloped up to the Club in the still pouring torrents, to hold an interview with Tony Breakspeare.

That gentleman, lounging over a fine wood fire, was enjoying a cigar and a novel, in the luxury of his dressing-gown, and the seclusion of his own apartments.

"Hullo," he exclaimed as the door opened and his friend, in a dripping mackintosh, presented himself, "not got enough rain *yet?*"

"No," hastily divesting himself of the moist garment and appearing in evening dress. "I had to come over —I—I—I was bound to see you."

"Sit down, have one of these," tendering a box of cigars, "and be calm, Jack. Something has happened—is Lord Rotherham dead?"

"Not that I know of. I've come to say I'm off to Coonoor to-morrow morning."

"You are!" straightening himself.

"Yes, my boy is packing now—the bill is being made out. I'll take the horses, and ride over quietly before it gets hot."

"So, Jack, you have taken the bit in your teeth at last, and my horses' bits too—but why? There was no hint of an exodus when we rode to this blessed picnic to-day."

No reply.

"I've got it! To put the matter in a nutshell, you are in love with Beatrice—'Girls will be girls'—and she has made a fool of you?"

"No, I've made a fool of myself! You told me that she was going to marry that sweep."

"Well? Yes, I did, and what then?"

"Then I came across her in the mist on the hill——" he came to a full stop, and wrung the water from his soaking cap.

"Mutual attraction—eh—personal magnetism?"

"It was awfully dark and wet, and I helped her down—Pascoe looked after Miss Bertram."

"I wish to goodness you had changed ladies!" interrupted his listener. "Pascoe will be playing the devil."

"And I could not help asking her if she was engaged," pursued the other. "Of course I know it was infernal cheek."

"And—*après?*" As Breakspeare examined the ash of his cigar a smile crept into his face.

"She said no, she was not—or ever would be."

"Good old Beatrice!" slapping his knee.

"And when I begged her to forgive me for the question—she said she—she—was not likely to marry anyone—because the only man she would accept, would *never* ask her."

"That's awkward," said Captain Breakspeare. "I

say, Jack—'pon my soul—eh?—I call it next door—eh—to a proposal?"

"Shut up, Tony, I'm sorry I told you—of course even if she meant me——"

"You old sinner—why of course she meant you!"

"Well, I've got a stone round my neck like a half-drowned dog—I've not struggled up till now, and now I will—it means everything. For six years, I've done time—hard labour for another person—and now I'm going to turn."

"Your metaphors are a little mixed, old man. There is not, or ever was, much of the worm about *you*."

"Yes there is!" he answered excitedly. "I have been, in the words of David, 'a worm and no man—the very scorn and outcast of the people.'"

"Good Lord, Jack! Are you off your chump?"

"No, only a little out of myself."

"I say—don't go walking, and coming, and standing, and changing chairs—you make me feel as if I was on the stage. Sit down, my boy, sit down, and let me congratulate you—*both*."

"But there is nothing settled—I've not said one word."

"But she has said several! Where are you going to? Come, you must stay here, and thrash this matter out. Beatrice has a little money of her own—her mother's fortune—and if you get a billet—why, oh, Lord!" bursting into a shout of laughter, "think of Mrs. Arminger! Her feelings when she hears that the proud and fastidious Beatrice, who has scorned Boggin, and several other splendid *partis*, is going to cast in her lot with a railway guard!"

"Tony, she never will, or shall, and it's a damned shame of you and me to suppose that she—Miss Arminger—would look at *me*. Yes, I must certainly be off my head to have told you. Consider that I have been delirious."

"Very well, then, I shall put you to bed, with ice on your head—you don't go to Coonoor to-morrow."

"Oh, yes, I do—it's now nine o'clock," looking at his watch, "and I must be off—I've——" and he glanced at Breakspeare with an odd expression on his white face, "another call to pay to-night."

"The fellow really is demented," muttered his friend, struggling out of his chair, but Vernon had already snatched up the wet mackintosh, and was gone.

Captain Breakspeare opened the door into the verandah; the drumming beat of steady torrents, and the wild gallop of a pony's hoofs were the only sounds that met his ear. Driven in by the rain, he exclaimed aloud:

"He must have got a touch of the sun—why the man is as mad as a hatter!"

CHAPTER XXVI

AFTER the "*Dodawetta*" picnic, as it was called, young Vernon was seen in Ootacamund no more; for some days he was missed at the Club, and inquired for in the hunting-field. He made no farewells—presumably had quietly returned to his station; though a pleasant fellow and a good sportsman, he was rather reserved about himself. There was a vague idea that "Vernon was in Opium"—the worst paid of all departments—for he seemed to know a good deal about Ganja and its methods of preparation, and had once been seen buried in a Blue-book—borrowed, of course.

So Vernon had disappeared, and his room and place were speedily filled, another young fellow had arisen from the fiery plains, and reigned in his stead. To

Beatrice Arminger, his absence made all the difference in the world; she had ridden and talked with him daily for a whole month. Now, no doubt, he had resumed his post at Tani-Kul, and was on duty between that station and Madras. Would she never see him again? Were they to be "as ships that passed in the night?"

She was returning home in September with the Bertrams, that was definitely settled; nothing less would shake off Sir Granville or silence her step-mother's insinuating whispers; her "sweetness" at times had become unbearably nauseous.

Seriously, Beatrice, although no one would have guessed it, mourned the departure of her cavalier on the bay thoroughbred. From the first, his modesty had touched her, his deference charmed her, he seemed never—or rarely ever—to forget the distance which yawned between them—his presence filled her with a sense of vague expectation, and she felt instinctively that something beyond the power of word analysis bound her to this young man! How shamefully he had been treated—if she had been in his place, she would have fretted, and worried and raged herself to death. But he was different, and accepted everything that came in his way with stoical composure; and she—that last moment on the slopes of Dodabetta, with the rain pouring from her hat—had been carried away and had spoken in her usual impulsive fashion, words that it made her hot, made her blush in the dark to remember. Had he heard? Had he understood? Would he despise her?

Nevertheless, in spite of a sore heart, and shattered self-respect, Miss Arminger remained a gay and attractive feature at the chief society functions; the young lady was not quite so punctual in her attendance at meets, or ever now to be seen in the forty horse-

power six-cylinder Napier car—but no one had any suspicion of the true reason of these shortcomings.

One night, as the Armingers drove up to their door, after a late dinner at the General's, they found that a servant with a stick and lantern was awaiting them in the verandah. He proved to be Mrs. Wenslade's butler, with a verbal message; which, like most such messages in India, is either wrongly delivered or given to the wrong person. In the present instance, the message was, "Please come at once."

"What *can* she want at this hour?" grumbled Mrs. Arminger peevishly, "and at half-past eleven—it's simply too utterly silly."

"Missus plenty sick," urged her emissary, "calling this Missus all the time."

"Nothing infectious, I hope?" said Colonel Arminger. "Well, darling, I suppose you must go—it's a fine dry night, and only two hundred yards away, and I'll escort you and bring you back—you need not remain—it's only some silly nonsense or other——"

"No, really, do you think I must?" looking up at him plaintively; "isn't it rather unreasonable?"

"Oh, well, you know she is a bit erratic, and you see we are a long way her nearest neighbours, and Wenslade is down in the Wynaad."

Beatrice stood in the porch, and watched her parents depart down the drive, in the wake of their guide, with his big swinging lantern; Mrs. Arminger's grey suède Louis Quatorze shoes and frothy lace petticoat looking absurdly out of place for an evening promenade. Then she strolled into the drawing-room, gathered up the evening post, and glanced over a few notes; afterwards she went yawning to her room, and was taking off her ornaments, when the door was suddenly flung open, and Mrs. Arminger burst in breathless.

"It's *you* she wants, Bee!" she announced excitedly.

"she would not see me—it's something frightfully urgent. I ran back nearly the whole way—oh, I do wonder *what* it is?" placing her hand on her heart. "Do, do hurry and find out, and let us know—her Ayah was crying—a hospital nurse is there—and yet all the time Linda is walking about, for I caught a glimpse of her." Again she paused for breath. "Here, put on your long cloak," dragging it out of the wardrobe, "and fly! Then come back at once, and tell me what it means."

Beatrice, driven out of the house by her step-mother's curiosity, threw the cloak over her dress, and ran down to the Dove-cot cottage. The atmosphere of the place conveyed an impression of a subdued commotion. Servants, instead of being sound asleep in their godowns, were squatting around the verandah chewing betel nut and muttering in groups—the air was electrical, and quivered with excitement.

Ushered into the drawing-room, Miss Arminger found a young nurse seated with her back to her at a table, leaning her head on her hands. Was she asleep? No, hearing a quick footfall, she turned about and said:

"Oh, miss, I am so thankful you have come. Mrs. Wenslade will not see anyone but you—she is in a terribly nervous state—the doctor has been and has dressed the wound, and will be here again first thing in the morning."

As the girl spoke in short, disjointed sentences, Beatrice's eyes were hastily surveying the apartment; on a sofa lay a feather boa, on the chair a book; a vase of flowers had been upset, and the water dripped in deliberate beats, unheeded, on the matting; everywhere there was a suggestion of a hasty flight. Meanwhile the nurse still continued to explain.

"It is essential that Mrs. Wenslade should be kept perfectly quiet," she pursued; "but she won't allow

me to go near her—she is pacing up and down her room, talking aloud, and has worked herself into a frantic condition. She cannot rest, till she sees *you*."

"But what has happened?" asked the girl. "What *is* the matter?"

Before the nurse could reply, a sobbing Ayah pushed aside a purdah and said:

"Missy, please come."

CHAPTER XXVII

MRS. WENSLADE, clad in an elaborate tea-gown, was trailing up and down her bedroom, with her left arm in a sling; her light dishevelled hair hung below her waist, and her face looked drawn, and ghastly.

"Oh, Beatrice!" she began in a strangled voice, coming to a sudden stop as she spoke. "Beatrice, look at me. I am a dying woman!"

Beatrice long accustomed to her friend's exaggerated expressions, promptly replied:

"Well, Linda, I should never have suspected it! You know how highly strung you are, and how things get on your nerves. I suppose this is the same sort of attack as the one you had that awful day off Socotra when you lay on the cabin floor, and screamed that we were going down—and yet here we are!"

"Off Socotra!" echoed Mrs. Wenslade. "Why that was nothing. I only wish we were there now."

"Pray speak for yourself," rejoined the girl, with a laugh. "I prefer dry land."

"Don't—don't laugh," cried the other, with hysterical violence. "What do you think! I've been bitten by a dog."

"Oh, as for that," retorted her visitor, in the same light tone, "*I* have been bitten by a horse."

"I daresay; but presumably the horse was not *mad*."

Beatrice gave a slight involuntary start, her gay eyes became grave.

"Yes," continued Mrs. Wenslade, now turning on her companion with a frantic expression, and a gesture that almost suggested violence. "I'm going to have hydrophobia!"

"No, no, you are not," protested the girl. "Nonsense. Sit down, Linda, sit down, please, and be calm. Don't give way to your nerves," she urged, "but try and pull yourself together, and tell me all about it."

"I'll tell you all about it," she answered, continuing to sweep from end to end of the spacious apartment in flowing skirts, and pink velvet slippers; "but I can't sit down. When any one of us is *bornée*, or out of ourselves, we must walk—walk—and walk."

"But you'll be absolutely dead if you go on like this," remonstrated Beatrice.

"Of course I shall be dead!" assented Mrs. Wenslade. "I shall be dead before this time to-morrow!"

"Come, Linda, do explain—I'm entirely in the dark. What has happened?"

For a moment Linda could not find her voice; something in her throat appeared to choke her. At last she said:

"This is what happened. I came in from a Bridge party at the Spencers' to-day, awfully done up. We had—five rubbers—I stayed late. And, oh, I might have known that something was going to happen, for in my last two hands I held the ace of spades; it simply stuck to me!"

"But, Linda——"

"Yes, yes; I'll go on. I decided not to dine at the Harleys', but remain at home and change into a tea-

gown—*this*, and as I was waiting for dinner, I strolled out in the front with darling Too-Too—and—and—suddenly a large black dog, with a yellow face, flew up the drive all in a moment. He made a snatch at the pug. I rushed at him, and hit him with a book I had in my hand. He snapped back, and bit me just below the elbow—oh, such a horrid bite! And then in a second he was gone—ran through the shrubbery towards the McPhersons'. Well, of course I screamed, and roused the whole place, and had my arm bathed, and sent for Doctor Simpson, and he came. But in the meanwhile, the Ayah and the butler told me that the dog was mad!"

She paused as if suffocated, and struggled for speech. "That a black dog had been in the Bazaar to-day, the police are searching for it—it bit a dog and a kid—and they have both been destroyed. You can't imagine my feelings, when I recovered from a dead faint. Well, the doctor came and cauterized the wound, and tried to soothe me, but he could not deny that there was a rumour of a mad dog being in the neighbourhood—a mad black dog. He said a lot about not letting things get on my nerves—*nerves!* to a woman who has been bitten by a case of rabies, and who any moment may begin to bark—yes, to bark! Just think of that! Oh, how I wish I could die at once and get it over. It's the *waiting* that's so awful!" As she wrung her disengaged hand, her expression was agonized, and her face worked convulsively. She looked like a woman who was losing her reason.

Beatrice rose and quietly took her arm, and began to pace to and fro with her distracted companion.

"I've sent a coolie runner down for Herbert," resumed Linda, "but he cannot be here for three days—possibly not in time for the funeral," and she burst into a wild cry.

"Oh, my dear, why expect the worst? Do not talk like this! You will probably live to be a very old woman."

"No, I won't—I'm only thirty-two—I always call myself twenty-eight—mind you put that in the obituary notice—my grandmother lived to ninety, and I shall be done out of sixty years. To think of it! And I have had such a good time!"

"And you may yet have a good time."

"Impossible. The Ayah says——"

"Oh, bother the Ayah," interrupted Beatrice impatiently.

"Bother her as much as you please, but listen. She is a most respectable old woman; and was in service with Lady Cliffe's sister for years. She has been twice to England."

"Yes, yes; but what has that to do with you?" inquired the girl.

"She has seen a case of hydrophobia; and knows the symptoms—pain in the head, thirst, great restlessness. I have every one of these!"

"I might have them, too, without any bite," rejoined Beatrice.

Mrs. Wenslade dismissed this suggestion, with a sweeping wave of her right arm.

"Thirty years ago, she says, when she was very young, she was Ayah to the wife of a man who was out in the Mysore district, about forty miles from Bangalore. He was bitten by a pet dog, that had hydrophobia. He knew that the bite was fatal, and he made his will at once, got a bullock bandy, and had himself driven into the station, for his wife's sake only; he realized that nothing could save him! She would travel in the same bandy, too, though he declared that he was dangerous—she sent the children with the Ayah—and long before they arrived at Bangalore, he

began to foam and snap, and he made his wife gag him. The doctors could do nothing; it was an awful, awful case! He implored them, screaming on his knees, to smother him, to shoot him—the Ayah believes they *did* something to release him from his agony—and this is all before *me!* Oh, my God!" and Mrs. Wenslade, losing all vestige of self-command, suddenly cast herself prone on her bed, and gave way to her emotion in a series of stifled shrieks, that ended in prolonged sobbing.

Beatrice suffered her to weep undisturbed; at any rate, it would relieve the iron tension. Meanwhile she stole out into the sitting-room, in order to confer with the hospital nurse, a prim young woman in blue serge.

"What does the doctor think, honestly?" she asked her. "You may tell me—tell me everything."

"He thinks Mrs. Wenslade is in a highly excitable state—that there has been one case of hydrophobia down the Segour-ghât. He has left me full instructions, and should anything develop," here she grew a shade paler, "I send for him at once; a peon is waiting in the compound. Mrs. Wenslade refuses to see me, or anyone but you."

"Of course I shall remain with her all night," said Beatrice. "I am not the least afraid. I'll just send a note up home, and if there is anything I can give Mrs. Wenslade, or do, instead of you—please instruct me."

"There is the sleeping draught; it has just come. It is essential that she should take it at once."

"Very well," said Beatrice, "she shall." Then she returned on tip-toe into the sick room, with phial and glass, where the patient still lay on her bed uttering broken exclamations, and cries of hysterical despair.

"Linda," said her friend, "see, I have brought you something."

"What?" slowly raising her face.

"Something to put you to sleep, dear, and do you good."

"Oh, no, I can't!" she moaned. "I must not sleep, but if I only could—could—tell you something—it would do me good—it would be such a relief."

"Then tell it to me at once, by all means," seating herself on the bed, and putting her arm round her, "then you shall take your draught, and go to sleep."

"Yes, I must speak first. I cannot die with it on my mind. I thought of sending for Mr. Sargent, the Padre, and telling him; but I'd far rather it was you. You see, you are not really like a girl, years younger than myself; you are so cool, and firm, and well balanced. Oh—I will—I must confess—I *must*," and she buried her face in the pillow, and sobbed hysterically.

"Come, Linda, it cannot be anything so very dreadful, I am sure. You magnify things. You know you have a highly-strung imagination," and she took a limp hand in hers, and pressed it tenderly.

"Well," suddenly sitting erect, and pushing back her hair, "it is about my cousin—John Talbot."

Beatrice started; her hand involuntarily tightened on the fingers in her clasp.

"Yes, when I'm dead it won't matter to me—and I must clear him."

Here, then, was the woman to whom he had alluded that Sunday on the downs; the woman who would not speak.

Mrs. Wenslade wrenched her hand away, and sprang off the bed.

"I can only tell you walking about," she declared. "Don't look at me, or I shall shriek. If you sit still, I'll think I'm only talking to myself. You know—no, you don't—your friend Vernon is really John Talbot.

I recognized him at the Club breakfast. At first, I hoped I was mistaken; I even put it in my prayers. Then seeing him and Tony Breakspeare together, I knew for certain. They had always been friends."

"Yes, yes," assented her listener breathlessly. "Go on."

"John's father was my father's step-brother, so good-looking and easy-going. He died, after some frightful financial losses, and we took the boy. He was about fifteen when he came to us, rather sad and quiet, but later he began to show his real nature—lively, fond of sport, ready to talk up to his elders, taking it for granted that everyone appreciated him and his society. He had been made too much of, and he rubbed the Pater the wrong way. He could not stand a boy asking questions of grown-up men—'What regiment are you in? Do you hunt?' He was far too careless and casual. Well, Jack was soon suppressed, and, of course, sent to school, where he displayed more taste for games than work. When he was at home, he and I were rather pals. I was a good deal older—in fact, 'out;' we used to ride together, and I told him all my money worries. For the Pater, though so rich, made me a miserable allowance—not even enough to pay for my hats and blouses."

"But what——?" Beatrice could get no further.

"Oh, yes; I'm coming to it—I'm coming to it!" said Linda, and she spoke so rapidly that her words seemed to tumble over one another. "John was in hot water. He failed for his exam., he broke the knees of a valuable cob, The Bishop. Father was simply wild. I heard him saying there was nothing for this lazy, useless, good-for-nothing but a ticket to the Colonies. I was in trouble, too; awfully in debt, and my beast of a dressmaker threatening proceedings,

and I was just starting on a visit to Corby Castle to meet Herbert. I had no frocks, absolutely nothing but worries, and old rags; and I knew if I looked nice, he'd propose—I was simply longing to get away into a home of my own. Mother was a lay figure, and father's temper was too abominable. My grandfather was a different man, so easy-going, never fighting tenants, or County Councils, but given to collecting curios, and prints, and miniatures. There they all were, in glass cases, and not a soul ever looked at them from year's end to year's end. I was penniless, and once or twice I sold two or three little nick-nacks on the sly. Yes," in answer to Beatrice's expression, "and they were never missed. I took them to a shop off Oxford Street, when I was going to my dress-maker's; and a gentlemanly old man there was very polite, and gave me a good price. I always wore my best clothes; sables and pearl earrings, and said I was selling things for a poor lady, and he asked no questions. One day, I was desperate. I'd been looking over my frocks and bills, and I'd had a lawyer's letter from 'Chenille,' and felt frantic, so I crept down very quietly after tea, and—and took two miniatures out of a case."

She halted for a moment, and as she looked at Beatrice the droop in her eyelid was really remarkable. Then she resumed her walk and her breathless disclosures. "I thought they would never be missed, and I knew they were worth a lot. I sent for Jack to come to my den for a talk, and he poured out his mind, and his wretchedness at not passing. Would the Pater give him another chance? I said I would do what I could —if he would help *me;* and run up to London and dispose of one or two little things left me by grandmamma. Of course, I was obliged to lie, and, after all, they might be mine some day! I told him I was

terribly hard up, and in debt. I wanted to go and stay at Corby Castle to meet Herbert, and had no frocks, or money—and he and I had been such tremendous pals. Would he promise never to breathe one word to anyone, just sell them, bring me the money—and swear to keep my secret?"

"Yes." Beatrice sat still, leaning a little forward, her hands so pressed together that they hurt.

"Well, Jack was always good-natured and of course he promised. Then I showed him the two articles. He took them away in his pocket, and ran up to town next morning, and returned in great glee with no less than three hundred and twenty-five pounds, all in notes. I was delighted—I had not expected nearly so much. He told me that they asked him questions at Byng's, and made him give his name and address, which, of course, he did. I offered him ten pounds, but he refused, and said he was only too glad to help me. I at once posted off a part of the notes, registered, to 'Chenille,' and received a crawling letter, offering to make me anything I liked, for next to nothing; so naturally I ordered a heap, and took her at her word. I paid some of my debts, too. A few days later, we had the Southminsters on a visit, and he and the Pater went up to town to some old stuffy Club meeting. They returned home unexpectedly early—about five o'clock. I was sent for to the library, and found the Pater, mother, the Southminsters, and a great storm brewing. At first, I could not understand what had happened? Father was walking about, mother was crying; but when I looked at the table, and saw the two miniatures, *I* knew what was coming—and I nearly collapsed! The Pater for once, by bad luck, had been prowling up Bond Street and staring into Byng's, a thing he probably never did in his life before. There, among all the pretty things, he recognized the minia-

tures—no mistake about them—his great-grandmother Lady Rachel, and her sister Ruth. They were certainly exquisite; all powder and pearls. He naturally thought of thieves, and flew in to claim his property—attended by old Southminster. And then it all came out. The miniatures had been sold on the 13th inst. by a young gentleman—yes, name and address duly entered in book! The young gentleman had not attempted any concealment, and had carried off three hundred and twenty-five pounds in notes. You may fancy how I sat listening, and shivering. If I came forward, I was ruined. I knew father—I would be shut up, or sent to his old Scotch cousins in Nairn. 'Chenille' had outdone herself, and I had such a lovely time before me—*such* frocks—and—I believe it was the thought of a certain pale blue and silver gown that turned the scale! And Jack—well, he was already in deep disgrace; he would never pass. It was only his evil day arriving just a little in advance. It might as well come now, as later! He was bound to be sent off somewhere; and I said to myself, 'Let him go now, and save *me*,' but I hoped it might not come to that. Father would rave and bluster, and walk and talk, but we all knew that hard words break no bones."

Beatrice made an inarticulate exclamation, almost inaudible.

"In the midst of a truly awful scene, Jack walked in, like a lamb among the wolves—utterly unconscious of his fate. He had been out hunting on a borrowed mount, and evidently had had a good run; he looked so cheery in his pink coat, and spattered breeches.

"'Any tea going?' he asked, in his off-hand way.

"Then the storm burst. Father waved his arm towards the miniatures, and shouted:

"'I knew you were a slacker and good-for-nothing

fool, but to-day I learn that one of my own family—my brother's only son—is a thief.'

"Jack stood just simply staring, white-faced, and speechless

"'You stole these and sold them to Byng,' shouted the Pater. 'I recognized them in his window providentially. Goodness knows how long this sort of thing has been going on, and how much you have pilfered, and squandered, on betting and cards.'

"'I never stole these things,' said Jack.

"'But you took them to London, and sold them. Your name is in the firm's book.'

"'Yes, I suppose it is,' he allowed.

"'And got three hundred and twenty-five pounds, and insisted on notes. What have you done with the money, sir? Come, own up!'

"Jack made no reply, he was deadly white, he stared at the floor. Then he looked over at *me*, and oh, I shall never forget his face—his expression of challenge, despair, and appeal. Yes, he evidently expected me to speak, to ruin myself. So I got up, and pretended that I had a bleeding at the nose, and rushed out of the library."

"You did that!" Beatrice caught her breath. "Oh, you coward—you coward! You coward!"

"Yes," whimpered Linda, "I've no moral courage, and I never saw Jack again, till that morning at the Club. I shut myself into my room; I said I was upset, I had neuralgia; I lived on tea and toast, and admitted no one but my maid. When I emerged the following night at dinner, Jack had gone! I must confess I was horrified. Mother told me that father thought at first of handing him over to the police, but subsequently decided to merely banish him from the country; and had taken him to London, and sent his own man of business with him down to Southampton.

He had packed Jack off abroad. It was all to be hushed up, she declared, his name was never to be mentioned—such an awful disgrace in the family.

"Well, I must confess, I was dreadfully shocked at first, but afterwards I felt relieved, and only pretended to be horrified. See, Beatrice, I speak as if I were on my deathbed, and tell you *all!* Lady Southminster and I used to whisper about it over the fire in her room. She said it was his mulish obstinacy in not telling what he had done with the money; his stubborn silence regarding this, that particularly enraged my father. At the last, he boldly declared he was innocent of the whole thing, and this, in the face of his own signature, drove the Pater nearly crazy. He called him a thief, a liar, a profligate, and ordered him to drop his honourable name, and never to dare to show himself again in England; and he has never done so." She paused and wiped her eyes. "We heard that someone saw him at the Cape, looking most dreadfully shabby and poor, and, later, that he died of enteric at Durban. I married, and prospered; but all the time, I've had this in my heart. And whenever I have been ill, or miserable, or depressed, I've been haunted by Jack's face that night in the library, the agonized imploring expression of his eyes as he raised them, and looked at me. Oh, they hurt me horribly. I am really *not* an unfeeling woman. I have a tender heart, and a painfully sensitive conscience, and I sometimes am wretched, and I seem to see Aunt Kathleen's face, too; she was so pretty and so sweet."

"And now, of course, you will clear him," interposed a sharp voice.

"Yes, I will, though I refused to do it ten days ago."

"Ten days ago?" repeated Beatrice, rising to her feet. "What do you mean?"

"Yes, you remember that awful wet night of your

picnic—thank Heaven I did not go. Well, I was just thinking of retiring to bed. I'd been asked to dine out, but I could not face it, and I just sat at home with a novel—a very dull one, too—when I heard steps, and the door opened, and Michael, the Portuguese boy came in, and said :

"'One gentleman to see missus—Mr. Talbot.'

"And there was Jack, white as a ghost, his hair all wet, the rain streaming down his face, while he mopped it with his handkerchief.

"'Well, Linda,' he began, 'I've come to look you up at last.'

"'So it seems,' I replied quite coolly, but my heart was thumping hard.

"'I give you notice, that you must release me—and confess.'

"His manner was so harsh and authoritative that it frightened me, but I sat perfectly still and said nothing. I was thinking of Herbert—who has absurdly strict ideas. His mother is next door to a 'Plim.'

"'Confess what?' I asked.

"'Oh, you know precious well,' he answered between his teeth. 'Own up that you took the miniatures and made me your scapegoat. You had the money—I had the disgrace. I lost everything,' I declare he was positively hoarse with passion, and, needless to say, he was walking about the room.

"'You sit there, just as you did that awful night, and let me be blamed—then you stole away. You sit here to-night, and don't speak, and expect to creep away again, but, by God! you *don't!* I was a foolish, chivalrous boy, simple for my age, unnaturally stupid. I made no sign. I went out a beggar in everything, and you got all you wanted, and a rich, easy-going husband! For more than six years I have worked by the sweat of my brow on the plains, done hard labour

out here, for your sake, Linda; and it is not as if I ever loved or even liked you—or as if you were a good woman.'

"Imagine his daring to talk to *me* like that, Beatrice. I declare his words seemed to blister my ears.

"'I put up with my lot, and worked for my daily bread,' he went on; 'always hungry for home, old friends, and the life I was born to. No one then cared a curse what became of me, but now it is different. I am no longer a wretched, friendless lad. I will fight for my own hand. I have a reason—an urgent reason, for demanding common justice, and that I may recover my good name and place in the world. God knows I'm poor enough, but I am a gentleman and man of honour!'

"'And what is your position?' I inquired.

"'A head guard on the Madras Railway.'

"I nearly screamed. Imagine a Talbot, a common guard!" and Linda turned to the *reason* again, who sat huddled up on the bed.

"He then proceeded to ask me to write privately to father, and clear him. 'There need be no scandal now. He may say it was all a mistake. I'll say nothing, and look here, Linda, I'll *give* you those six years!'"

"And you?" inquired Beatrice in a frozen voice, as she raised her head, and looked at Linda.

"Oh, I knew father would never hush it up—he never hushes up anything! He would drag me out, yes, although I was his own daughter, and gibbet me; so I made up my mind to fight; and I said: 'I admit that I have behaved badly, but there is no use in digging up a family scandal; anyway, you know you would have been turned out sooner or later. The story is forgotten now. I will do my best to help you, Jack, and start you in something. I'll give you five hundred pounds.'"

"And what did he say?" asked her listener.

"I think he swore, and he said:

"'I'll make you speak, Linda. If you won't clear me, I'll clear myself. I'll write to my uncle.'

"'He would not believe you, if you did. There is your signature. What can you say—what witness have you, but *me*?'"

"'That's true,' he said, 'no one but you. You took precious good care of that—oh, you deceitful, lying devil, and so you won't speak?' he shouted.

"'No, I won't,' I said. I was terribly frightened, and I felt I was trembling all over; but I can be firm, and I said, 'No, never.'

"Then he stood still, and stared at me.

"'As sure as I stand here, Linda, and cannot compel you to clear me, God will make you speak yet!'

"And he went away, leaving me most awfully upset, but he got no promise, and now his words have come true, you see. God has punished me, and He has made me speak." She gasped a little for breath, then she said: "What do you think, Beatrice?"

For a moment there was no sound save Linda's hurried breathing.

"I think that I never listened to anything so terrible as your story," said Beatrice, as at last she rose and came forward, her face whiter than the other's, her eyes aflame and tragic. "You must not only speak—but write."

"Oh, I can't—no, no, I won't! No, no, no!"

"*He* had to write, and sign, and so shall you," said Beatrice in a low, stifled voice. Then she brought a blotter and a pen, placed a chair at the table with deliberate intention, and beckoned to her companion.

"But what can I write?" whimpered the culprit. "You must dictate."

"Then write," said Beatrice, "what I tell you.

Begin. 'I, when Linda Talbot, took the two miniatures out of a case in the drawing-room, and gave them to my cousin John Talbot, to dispose of for me, under promise of secrecy. I told him they were my own property. He sold them in London, and brought me the money (three hundred and twenty-five pounds) in notes, which I used to pay my debts.—LINDA SEYMOUR-WENSLADE.'"

"There," said Beatrice, as the last word was scrawled and blotted, "that will be worth more than five hundred pounds to your cousin. And now you are exhausted from walking, and talking, and I have listened to your confession, as I promised! You will keep your promise to me, and take this sleeping draught!"

Mrs. Wenslade, who was utterly worn out with exertion and mental anguish, mechanically accepted the glass and swallowed the contents without protest. Then she cast herself down on the bed, and Beatrice covered her carefully, and lowered the light. In a short time, long-drawn breathing announced the success of the sleeping potion, and Beatrice Arminger crept out to inform the nurse, and to beg that there might be silence in the bungalow. Presently she returned to her watch, her vigil. There lay Linda, prone and motionless, for the present as insensible to her terrors as she had been to her conscience, and her cousin's misery. She, the culprit, the heartless, egotistical woman, was surrounded with every luxury. As Beatrice's eyes travelled round the room, she noted the costly mirrors, the gold toilet set on the dressing-table, the wonderful gowns and furs hanging in an open wardrobe, and the delicate perfumes that seemed to linger in the air. Extravagance, luxury and self-indulgence, proclaimed themselves on every hand.

And the scapegoat—where was he? Toiling in the heat down at Tani-Kul, doing hard labour for Linda's

crime. Well, there would be an end of that. She held the confession in her hand, had wrung it in writing from the cunning, cruel wretch who only had confessed her sins when the horror of a hideous death had suddenly confronted her.

CHAPTER XXVIII

MRS. SEYMOUR-WENSLADE awoke refreshed; wonderfully restored by hours of dreamless sleep: the doctor pronounced her symptoms satisfactory, there was little or no fever. The bite was undoubtedly bad, but he did not apprehend "consequences," and was making the most searching inquiries with regard to the fatal black dog.

Released for a time, Beatrice returned home, still in her evening dress, had a bath, changed and breakfasted, reassured her father, and satisfied Mrs. Arminger's burning curiosity.

Linda Wenslade, who was terribly excitable, had been bitten by a dog, and she was going back to remain with her in the afternoon.

"I say, Bee," said her father, "have you seen this—the card of Wellington races on Monday?"

"No," holding out her hand.

"Breakspeare sent it down from the Club—that young fellow Vernon is riding two of his horses: Fontenoy on the flat, and Grand Slam over the sticks."

The intelligence affected Beatrice; she felt her heart bound. In a day or two, she would see him—and carry him the good news of his freedom.

"Shall we motor down?" said Mrs. Arminger. "Sir Granville wants us to go with him; he will have a tent on the course."

"No, no; let us take the landau," urged the girl, "or father and I might ride?"

"Well, at any rate I'll go in the motor," declared Mrs. Arminger; "and get there in no time. If I do not accept, Sir Granville is sure to offer it to that odious Mrs. Hoare, 'the Bird of Freedom,' as they call her, and she would be so cock-a-hoop!"

"Please yourself, my dear," said her husband. "Bee and I will travel in state in the landau, and if you break down, we can take you on—which would not be so easy, if we were on horseback. But I'll send a horse, as I am one of the stewards."

"I suppose Mr. Vernon is staying in Coonoor?" said Beatrice, with her eyes on her plate.

"Yes, I believe so; he has been training the horses on the course—a capital business. For my part, I shall back both his mounts, though Sir Granville has a likely stud-bred in for the Planters' Cup, and a good man to ride it—not that *he* knows much about racing himself, only he considers it the thing to do, and he bought the horse from a young planter who is hard up—bad season—tea down—and the fellow will ride it, too."

For nearly twenty-four hours Beatrice spent most of her time with an hysterical, distracted woman—who sustained herself with strong tea, and *crême-de-menthe*—and it had been a really terrible experience. On the afternoon of the second day the doctor arrived radiant, and announced that there was not at present a single case of rabies in the district; also that the dog with the yellow face proved to be the Gordon setter belonging to Major McPherson, whose bungalow was just above the Dove-cot, an animal known to be snappish to strangers, and to have a habit of taking a short cut through Mrs. Wenslade's premises.

Oh, what a relief, a reprieve; the tension was re-

moved. Mrs. Wenslade's hard, white face relaxed, her staring eyes glittered, and she went off into screaming hysterics.

"Give her sal-volatile and keep her in her room to-day," said the doctor, "and I'll stop her husband coming up—anyhow, I'll wire to his nearest post-office. She will be all right in no time."

The sharp release from her fears soon restored Linda to her normal condition. Linda recovered was a practical illustration of "When the devil was ill, the devil a saint would be; when the devil was well, the devil a saint was she!" Revived by a glass of champagne, Mrs. Wenslade began to chatter with her usual volubility.

"It was all the hateful Ayah frightening me to death and crying and howling, and, besides, the bite itself was bad, and the dog ran on—as they do. But," and her voice suddenly rose to a higher pitch, "I am reprieved—I am reprieved! I am reprieved!"

"Yes, you are indeed," gravely assented her listener; "you have reason to be truly thankful."

"And look here, Bee, believing that I was on my deathbed I confessed my sins to you—did I not? I talked a heap of rubbish."

"You certainly talked a great deal; and you confessed to one sin in writing."

"Yes, so I did. Well, now you must let me look over my little confession." Noticing the girl's stern expression, she added, in another tone, "come—don't be a pig, Beatrice."

"I cannot promise;" involuntarily she put out her hand, as if to ward off something, "it depends on circumstances."

"Oh, nonsense, you are not going to stick to the paper, and give me away?"

"No; but you must clear Mr. Talbot."

"Then I simply won't," declared Linda, no longer cowed, but defiant.

"But I say yes; you simply will!"

"You say this, because you are in love with him," cried the culprit, becoming scarlet as she spoke. "I know you were always riding together."

"Never mind saying silly things, Linda. He could not speak—you would not speak—but *I* will."

"What! You go and mix yourself up in the affairs of a guard—a strange young man who is absolutely nothing to you?"

"But why not—when his case is just?"

"Then I tell you plainly that I shall deny every single word I told you. If people ask me any questions, I'll swear I was *raving*. So now you see who you have to deal with. I acknowledge that I am shameless, and always stick up for myself."

"No need to tell me that—but you have to deal with me. In the first place, people will believe what I say. I am not a poor friendless boy; I am the daughter of Colonel Arminger, and *he* will listen to me and stand by Mr. Talbot. We are indebted to him for a great service! and I do not tell lies and sneak and steal, and let others suffer. *You* shall pay this time; yes, I will take the paper to Lady Southminster, and tell her the whole story."

"Bah!" banging her hand on a table; "you dare not! you dare not!"

"Or you will write to Lord Rotherham, and I will dictate the letter," she continued, tranquilly.

"You are mad—crazy—off your head!"

"Am I? If you refuse, Mr. Talbot can employ detectives at home, late as it is. Places of business keep books and numbers of notes; the numbers of Byng's and 'Chenille's' are certain to tally. That

will be the first step. Then you will be taken into court, and cross-examined—and——"

"Oh, you clever, clever young schemer!" screamed Linda. Suddenly she met the girl's eyes; her look filled her with a vague alarm—she was frightened by what she read there.

"'To every coward safety, and afterwards his evil hour!' I saw that quotation only yesterday," said Beatrice.

"This is your evil hour, Linda; you will write the letter, and send it by this mail—it closes at seven o'clock? If you agree, I will promise not to publish the story all round Ooty; though, upon my word, I think your half-sheet of confession ought to be put up on the library notice board, and despatched to the *Times* and *Morning Post*. But I will not do this; nor disclose more than I can help. I'll endeavour to smother the crime—but you must write the letter."

And ultimately Beatrice prevailed.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE first day's racing had nearly come to an end; there remained but two more events on the card. So far it had been a pre-eminently successful meeting; the weather was delightful, neither too hot nor too chilly. In perfect hill sunshine, Ootacamund and Coonoor had poured hundreds of people down to Wellington course—which is an oblong valley, surrounded by hills on all sides, except where a stiff fence intervenes between the run in and the winding road up to Coonoor. There was a vast gathering of all sorts of people; high up on the bank above the course, were thousands of natives and many of the soldiers from Wellington Barracks. The plateau, shaded by

a great tree and a thatched shed, which does duty for a stand, was crowded by ladies in Ascot frocks, and men with field-glasses. In the centre of the course, were grouped carriages, horses, riders, and many eager groups of men and women; at some distance were the low range of stables and the polo club-house.

The Planters' Cup had afforded delirious excitement, had ended in an almost neck and neck struggle between Sir Granville Boggin's stud-bred "Toda Queen" and Captain Breakspeare's English-bred "Fontenoy," four-year-old, by Musketeer—and Fontenoy, after a desperate effort, had won by half a length.

The Lancers, and their friends, cheered loudly and were enthusiastic at the victory. They had to a man backed Fontenoy, their horse, and he was admirably ridden, too. Sir Granville was by no means well pleased; he never could take a beating; and it seemed incredible that he was unable to obtain everything he was ready to *pay* for. Toda was a good mare, and, he understood, half a stone better than the soldier's entry. There must be some flaw, some cheating; he was looking about to see if he could not lodge an objection.

And there was Miss Arminger, talking to the fellow who had ridden him—Vernon—and he glared at the figures: one in a white gown with blue hat and parasol, the other in a long coat which displayed a red silk jacket and racing kit.

It was the first time the couple had met since they had parted in the pelting storm on the slopes of Dodabetta, and though Beatrice had been longing for this day, until now—after the manner of anticipated delights—it had proved a woeful disappointment. Mr. Vernon had kept aloof from the stand and been exclusively occupied with men—he did not even appear at lunch! She had had visions of making wild signals

with her cornflower-blue parasol, but ultimately decided to dispatch an emissary in the shape of Tony Breakspeare, who, at the present moment, was handing round "the Cup" filled with champagne, and requesting his friends to drink to the health of Fontenoy.

"Yes, and of Mr. Vernon too," added the young lady. Then, in a lower voice, "Tony, will you please go and tell him that I wish to speak to him? Go now!"

"All right, but I know he has to be in Tani-Kul tomorrow; he has had extra leave and overstayed it for this race—he got a wire just before tiffin."

"I must see him before he starts—I've something to tell him—something of the greatest importance."

"*You* have something of the greatest importance to say to Vernon!" repeated her cousin with peculiar significance. "Beatrice, he is a friend of mine, and a gentleman—but you know——" He stopped, and added, "Mind what you are about—*prenez garde.*"

"Oh," with an impatient gesture, "you stand there and make silly puns! Go at once—or I shall have to run, and fetch him myself."

"Then, in that case——" and giving his broad shoulders a shrug Captain Breakspeare departed, and presently returned accompanied by Vernon.

"I want to congratulate you," she said; "shall we move away a little? I want to congratulate you."

"Thank you, Miss Arminger. It was a near thing; I'm glad Fontenoy just got his nose in front. Old Tony is delighted—his first win!"

"Yes, yes, we were all delighted, of course, but,"—she glanced at him and added tremulously—"I am speaking of something else—Mr. Talbot."

He gave a smothered exclamation. "Ah! so Tony has told you?"

"Nothing more than what you told me yourself; it is your cousin, Mrs. Seymour-Wenslade, who has

confessed everything. I see you think it is incredible."

Then in a few breathless sentences she sketched the supposed case of rabies, Linda's terror of death, her confession.

"You know, she used to talk to me a good deal. She is terribly excitable; in an agony of fear she related the whole story, as she walked about the room."

"And yet when I went and prayed to her, she was dumb as death itself. I was powerless—since she refused to release me."

"Now you are released! I made her write and sign a little paper, and though, when she found she was safe, she tried hard to get it back, I stuck to it, and here" opening a silver bag—"it is."

Vernon glanced over the half sheet, his hand shook as he held it, the blood rushed to his forehead, he felt a sudden throb of liberation. At last! He was a free man!

"I declare you are wonderful, Miss Arminger," he exclaimed, "you have given me back everything."

"No, I cannot give you back the lost years."

"I am not sure that they were lost; but for them—I'd never have known you."

"I've kept the great discovery to myself," she resumed with a heightened colour, "I've only whispered it to the Pater; I wanted to be the first to tell you. I had a most awful scene with Linda. I can be determined, and I frightened her. I warned her I'd proclaim the truth to everyone, and would not be dumb, like you. I vowed I'd go straight to Lady Southminster, and that you would get detectives to trace the notes—the numbers would be entered in books. In short I was so forcible, that I prevailed on her to sit down and write to Lord Rotherham—and I posted the letter myself. Although I promised to make no

scandal in Ooty, and to keep her secret, she said the most awful things to me." At the mere recollection the girl's lips trembled, and the colour burned in her face. "Of course, I could not have appeared. I would have handed over the business to the Pater and Tony. Linda stormed; she was simply livid with anger. She said I had no right to interfere in her family affairs, and will never speak to me again."

"Nor you to her, I should imagine," he said dryly.

"What a heartless, selfish creature, so flimsy, and yet so immovable and hard. I could not have believed that such a character existed."

"And how can I ever thank you, Miss Arminger?"

She raised her hand in quick protest as she said, "I expect your letter of recall will come in about three weeks."

"And I must start for Tani-Kul now. I've overstayed my leave as it is. There is serious trouble down there; they have wired for me."

"But I really cannot see why you need ever go back," she answered, with a touch of impatience.

"You don't suppose I want to—do you?" and he looked at her intently. "Think of leaving this lovely climate, and my easy life—and—and—but the railway has been my home, and I owe it something. If there is trouble, I'm bound to lend a hand; anyway I could not chuck my post. But when my uncle's letter arrives, I will get a couple of days, and bring it up for you to see. I say, what does this fellow want, coming over here?" alluding to Sir Granville Boggin, who was bearing down upon them. "I gather from his expression that he has spotted *me!* I'll write to you tomorrow. And now I must go—or I shall miss my train."

The words, and a familiar voice, "Miss my train—it leaves at eleven o'clock sharp, and I'll barely do it."

"Ah! I thought we had met before!" said a loud, blustering bass. "Miss Arminger, may I ask if you are aware who you are honouring with your notice? This fellow is just a common railway guard, and a most insolent, overbearing scoundrel. I have reported him, and I'd like to know what he is doing up here—masquerading as a gentleman?"

"You had better tell Tony," said Vernon, ignoring his enemy, as he wrung her hand; and getting on his waiting pony, he galloped away.

"He—do you understand?—he is an impostor, Miss Arminger," reiterated the baronet, "and—and—a jackanapes in borrowed clothes!"

"Oh, no, he is a lion, in an ass's skin; others are asses in lions' skins," replied the lady, and the two measured each other for a moment.

Sir Granville Boggin blew out his cheeks, his little sharp eyes blazed.

"The jockeys were supposed to be gentlemen riders only. I shall go at once, and lodge an objection with the stewards."

"Pray go, by all means, Sir Granville," said Beatrice; then she turned her back on him, and walked away.

"Hullo—what's this—what's this? John Vernon to be disqualified?" said the secretary. "Why? What! A railway guard up on leave! Oh, come, I say, you know, this is a bit thick!"

"But I can swear to it," gobbled the baronet, "I saw him myself at Jolapett Station, where his conduct to me was outrageous."

"Colonel Arminger, do you hear this? What is to be done? Is Vernon to be disqualified? he is not a gentleman!"

"Mr. John Vernon Talbot is the nephew of my old friend, Lord Rotherham—his father was in the Knightsbridge Lancers."

"But is he really in the Madras railway employ, drawing pay as a working guard?"

"Yes, I believe he is," boldly acknowledged Colonel Arminger, "and has this moment returned to his duty—temporarily. You know, some of the family are a bit eccentric. He is a fine horseman, like his father, and I should say that there can be no question but that young Vernon, as a gentleman rider, is entitled to the race."

CHAPTER XXX

IT was a painful come-down in every sense, to descend from the flower-scented blue hills, to quit the mountain air, familiar scenes, congenial associates, and Beatrice Arminger; to abandon the position of a gentleman who had established his name as good cricketer, and rider, to return once more to a guard's white uniform, and the dull, sweltering plains. Here, as Vernon travelled along—alert and watchful from sheer force of habit—were the labouring bullocks, the Dravidian temples, the strange squadron of great stone horses—well-known to all travellers to the Neilgherries—and the sturdy, dark-skinned natives working in the wet, lush paddy-fields—at home in the land, long before Aryan or Mogul! Here were the palms and temples of the South, villages set among broad-leafed tropical plants. This was old-established India; India of tradition, real Hindostan.

As Vernon passed the station next to Tani-Kul, and entered upon a wide tract of barren solemnity, he realized that he was once more on the old familiar ground, where he must put his neck under the yoke and return to duty for a time. The news Beatrice Arminger had brought him had been so unexpected,

that he felt momentarily stunned. He would have given much to have remained, and discussed the matter at length—a matter so vital. However, there was no time to shilly-shally, now duty summoned him; but as he was rattled down the Ghaut, as he lumbered along in the train, the traveller's mind was unusually active.

This priceless slip of paper in his pocket-book embodied much; it was his passport of re-admission into the family; into England; into a position in which he could marry Beatrice. Meanwhile he must be patient, and wait upon events; this was his serious, ultimate conclusion.

The first event awaiting Vernon was a long interview with Mr. Sharratt, who, after laying stress on six weeks' leave, an extra three days, and administering a sharp rebuke, assured him that he was thankful to see him, and that he wanted him badly.

"Between you and me," he confided, "Booth has gone to the bad—I'm afraid he must get the sack! He is so careless and slack, sometimes I think he drinks—he has such a wild look."

"Drink—that would be quite new."

"It's all Rosita—Rosita," declared Sharratt, grasping his beard. "When she gets hold of a fellow he is done for. You may bless your lucky stars *you* had too much good sense ever to let her make a fool of you. Now, I want you to give Booth a hint; he would take it from you as a friend. If I speak, I must——" here he put the end of his beard into his mouth, ever a signal of danger. "You see, you are steady, responsible and reliable—a grand support to me, young as you are."

"It is very good of you to say so, sir; and I may as well tell you privately, that I am shortly giving up the railway, and going home."

said it was all spite—others that she made—"hand over fist" and cheated the settlement! Gojar was sick—"very bad this time"—imparted Coffey—"he had not left his den for ten days—maybe—he was dead!"—Vernon promptly volunteered to go, and look him up, and having received elaborate instructions as to the route, he departed. It was the usual narrow Madras Bazaar, established in an atmosphere of cocoa-nut oil, spices, and Oriental humanity, with open stalls, toddy shops, brass chatties, sticky sweets, coloured paper for temples, sarees, betel bags, baskets of gram, glass bangles, pariah dogs and sacred bulls. Gojar lived at the back of a grain shop; the entrance was in a mysterious lane, behind the principal thoroughfare. The visitor knocked on the door, which, after a long wait, was opened by a little shrivelled old woman in a gorgeous red silk saree, with a deep gold border, handsome rings depended from the lobes of her ears, and a cabochon emerald dangled from her flat nose. She also wore a heavy gold chain, and a tinkling of silver anklets and bangles emphasized her importance. In short, a most prosperous individual, but an individual who was not pleased to see a stranger, and looked him over with ill-concealed annoyance.

"What you want?" she asked sharply in English; "why you come 'ere?"

"To see Gojar."

"'Ee is sick—never seeing no one, plenty bad business—you coming 'ere now. Please, sir, go away—I cannot 'ave you," she added authoritatively, "noh—you go!"

"He will see me," said this forward young guard; "will you ask him?"

"But 'ee is sleeping, so you go," and she drew the strings of a little bag of rich brocade, and deliberately helped herself to betel nut.

"Vernon, you don't mean it! And just as you were getting a rise—assistant station-master at Wadi——"

"I am, I hope, getting a rise elsewhere."

"And how soon?"

"A month or six weeks, I don't wish to leave you in the lurch."

"Anyway, you cannot stir just now, even if you wanted to. The Company are, of course, at a dead loss over these thefts, besides the scandal, and giving the line a bad name. They are sending a special official to hold an inquiry, and all the guards will have to be on the spot. You see they are the responsible people, but the thieves are so nippy that they can never be spotted. These robberies invariably take place between Arconum and Raichore—one would think the line was bewitched," and he rose from his chair, and walked out.

It was surprising to Vernon, how soon he settled into harness, and his old quarters. After a day or two's duty, he could have imagined the last six glorious weeks to have been a dream, for here he had nothing to remind him of his leave.

When he and Booth met and talked together, he had again been struck by a change in Charlie—he was restless, irritable and depressed—and felt confident that he was the victim of Rosita's rapacity; if Charlie failed to supply her needs—Ah! Vernon seemed to see a train of tragic consequences, resulting from that failure.

Katty and her husband had received their favourite lodger with open arms, praised his looks and declared that—"the change had done him a power of good." As for themselves, they were just wagging along—and the place as usual—only for a terrible "vegetable" scandal, the heroine of which was—Madame. Some

"All right, I'll wait a bit, you go and ask," and the visitor sat down, saying, "I'm in no hurry. Tell him it's Vernon." Rajee glared at him, then muttering to herself, she disappeared through a doorway.

The outer room was large and low, the floor of beaten mud, with fine mats, the walls were covered with pictures cut from illustrated papers. There were brass cooking chatties—as much the insignia of prosperity in India as a butler in an English establishment—a charpoy heaped with fat cushions, a huka, a fire-place, a large duplex lamp—that was all.

Presently the Ayah pushed aside the purdah, and he caught a glimpse of an inner apartment, lined with books from floor to roof.

"Sahib telling come in," said the woman, in a peevish key. "The Sahib plenty sick, you never staying long."

Vernon found Gojar lying on a low couch, wrapped in a camel-hair gown, an embroidered cap replaced the well-worn blue turban. Tom Sahib received Vernon with demonstrative civility, vacated the only chair, and then jumped up beside his master.

His master looked ill, his eyes were glazed and sunken—there was a peculiar smell in the place—oleander, or what?

"So you found out my lair," he murmured, extending a wasted hand. "'Omar'—'Marcus Aurelius'—and 'De Quincey' are my boon companions. I never admit anyone else—not even you—only I'm so weak, I thought I would, as I might never see you again. There is our one chair, sit down."

"You're not so bad as all that, I hope?" said Vernon, seating himself.

"I need not ask if you had a good time," remarked Gojar. "Why, you look another man!"

"And I feel it—and how are you? You certainly seem rather cheap?"

"Then appearances are deceitful! The expectations have been realized. I am worth one hundred and thirty-five thousand pounds. Do you call that cheap?"

"I am awfully glad. But, I say, Gojar, you don't seem to have begun to live up to your fortune."

"Not yet, but Rajee is doing her best for me. Have you noticed her jewels? She has the finest in Tani-Kul; surpassing even the soucar's wife. She is happy—utterly happy. Think of it!"

"You won't remain here now, will you?"

"No, but I may never be able to move. If I do, I'll go to the Shevaroys, and take a bungalow with a big garden. A specially good kind of Ganja is found up there—but I'm not off yet. I want to get back to my work for a bit, and puzzle out the thefts."

"So then you've not found any clue?"

"No, but it's no outside thing. Sharratt is in a nervous state—I believe he is afraid that the Company will blame him."

"Sharratt cannot have eyes everywhere!" protested Vernon, who was using his own, surveying a room lined to the ceiling with well-bound "heavy" books, almost the sole furniture. There was the one arm-chair, a table, a press, several fine rugs covered the floor and hanging on the wall were the watchman's coat and belt. Then he turned his attention to Gojar, who exhibited every sign of emaciation and exhaustion, and was evidently recovering from a bad bout; yes, he was slowly sacrificing his body to the magical drug, which bore him away into the realms of imagination. What dark spirit was brooding in the dim room? A mixture of riches and poverty; of intellect and squalor.

"Give it up, Gojar," he said abruptly; "give it up, be a man, and go home."

"Give it up, give it up!" repeated Gojar, "my

good, well-meaning youth, no; I have no desire to return to the 'waking' life, the life of home. Here I live where the gods reign—in a world of beauty, and am content. A seat in the parish church, and on the bench, a position in the country—*no*—a tweed suit and leather leggings would not accord with my twelve chillums a day! I am not anxious to hear about politics, poaching, and the price of turnips per ton. I will never cross the Kristna and the Kali-pani, but you will—and soon. Tell me of your holiday—talk—talk—talk!"

In a short time, Vernon had exhausted his little budget, and unfolded his tale with stammering pauses, a certain amount of rude eloquence, and an energy that carried conviction.

"So that woman released you, you dull, down-trodden, patient *ass!* I remember, you tried to tell me about the man who sold pictures—Charles Surface and his ancestors—you disposed of the miniatures of your ancestors, and the cousin wolfed the spoil and left you the shells! Lord, what a creature! Entirely remorseless. At any rate, that's ended—you go home soon, and marry the grey-eyed girl. I should like to see her."

"Nothing is settled yet—it may never come off—I am waiting for my uncle's letter."

"You have the confession, and that's enough—what more do you want? After all, I believe you owe everything to my ring—and my good wishes. I wished you happiness—a return to England, which was very unselfish of me—and good fortune. Well now, you'd better clear. It was kind of you to be uneasy about the old ruffian and to send him books, papers and letters—the old reprobate is grateful, but you are never to come here again; your visit will excite suspicion—the Bazaar folk will wonder what a smart guard is doing

in my den? They will, however suspect that you have come about the thefts, and that excuse may pass for once! Rajee will show you out; as soon as I'm on duty, I'll let you know—now good-day."

Rajee escorted Vernon to the outer door with dignified alacrity, and much jingling of bangles and anklets.

"Please, sir," she said, "never come again to this 'ouse—too much talk making; and Mr. Gojar, 'e 'ates talk—and prying eyes. Good hafternoon!"

CHAPTER XXXI

It was a sweltering August forenoon on the plains; black shadows of the settlement barracks were sharply defined on the yellow soil, a blinding meridian sun poured itself upon Tani-Kul; venturesome dogs were sheltering under water filters, even the audacious Indian crow courted the shade, and silence.

In the Coffey house verandah, Katty, Nokes and Vernon were seated at breakfast, whilst the faithful pariah waited upon them with unblinking assiduity.

Nokes was devouring vegetable curry with a gulping sound, and a pewter spoon. Vernon, whose appetite was now somewhat dainty, was turning over a fat pork chop with a fastidious fork. Katty, presiding behind a large brown teapot, awaited the arrival of her lord and master with marked impatience.

"I can't think what in the living earth kapes Tim," she grumbled. "He is generally roaring for his rations. I've never known him late, barrin' the morning of the accident three years ago, and when I saw him comin', I declare to ye he was that bet up and wake, ye'd think his legs was put on with hooks and eyes!"

Vernon laughed as he pushed away his plate.

"Maybe the pork is not to yer likin', me dear. I can swear it's clean fed, and not native feeding."

The young man gave an involuntary shudder—for a certain daintiness in food, and person, had remained his unalienable legacy.

"I don't know what's come to ye at all," continued Mrs. Coffey, "unless yer in love. I think them hills made off with your appetite—ye scarcely ate what would kape life in a bird."

"Now come, Mrs. Coffey—are you thinking of cormorants? I've done well, if I might just have an egg?"

"An' to be sure—here is one for ye, laid this very morning. I may say it went out of the nest into the saucepan—oh, here he is!" as a gaunt, powerful figure loomed into sight.

"What kept ye, Tim?" she bawled.

"Bedad, there's the divil to pay!" announced Coffey as he blundered up the verandah steps, and flung himself into a chair.

"Divil or not, will ye ate yer vittles?" said Katty in an inexorable voice, as she pushed a plate towards him; "'tis stone cold."

"Why, what's up?" inquired Nokes, helping himself to another hopper, with an air of easy unconcern.

"Sharratt is clean out of his mind," replied Coffey, divesting himself of his coat as he spoke. "Clean and clever mad—I declare to ye, I thought he'd go through the station roof!" As the two men looked at him interrogatively, he added, "A box of specie has been stolen on the line—faix, and done neatly too!"

"What?" said Vernon, "stolen—man alive, it's impossible!"

"'Tis the truth I'm tellin' ye," declared Tim, now speaking with his mouth full, "taken out between Arconum and Raichore. Ye know them boxes of gold

that come up, all iron clamped, right size, and weight, and weighed three times in transit, and sealed and stamped? Well, wan of them. Yesterday the dummy was opened—it looked all right outside, but inside was nothing but bricks, all packed in paper as neat as bits of wedding cake, and the weight to an ounce."

Nokes gave a vehement exclamation, and Vernon, pushing away his new-laid egg, rose to his feet.

"Finish yer breakfast, me son," urged Coffey, with a nod of his grizzly head; "faix, ye'll want great support to face the station-master, when he's on the war-path."

"That's true," assented Nokes, "and this is a matter that touches us guards—I'm inclined to think it's some hoax."

"Hoax!" shouted Coffey. "Thunder and turf! will ye listen to him!"

"That's so, for I'm on this line fifteen years, and I know what I'm talking about—such a robbery could not take place, eh, Vernon?"

"Oh, well, wait till ye see Sharratt, me bold fellow," said Coffey, "an' he puts ye through yer drill."

"I suppose he is in one of his nervous states," remarked Vernon, "and I'd sooner be examined in single and double block-line, than have to do with his questions; but I agree with Nokes here, it's just a Raipore shave—no mortal man could lift the gold once we take it over. Well, I'm going off to face the music!" and throwing a bone to the yellow pariah, he ran down the steps.

But in spite of the confident assertions of the two guards, the news of the robbery was confirmed. Tani-Kul seethed and simmered with excitement; although this audacious crime had not taken place within its most respectable borders, nothing else was discussed in the Quarters, or at the Institute. A box of gold,

guarded with such care, sealed, stamped, weighed and measured, nevertheless gone. Incredible!

Two or three days elapsed and there was no clue, no trace of the gold or the thieves and their accomplices. One night Gojar sent a coolie with a line to Vernon, "Come to the shed," said the "chit."

The hour was ten o'clock, and there he found Gojar awaiting him, his sunken eyes glittering with excitement.

"Sit down," he said, "I have news for you, my boy."

"All right—I hope it's about the box?"

"Ah, even you have *esprit de corps*, though you will soon be gone from here."

"Not before this is cleared up—it's a horrible thing hanging over us guards."

"Yes," and the railway fellows always stick together through thick and thin—don't you? Well, I think I have a clue to the gang."

"You have?" incredulously.

Gojar nodded. "Thanks to Tom's vigilance. One night about a week ago, I was nodding here, or supposed to be. I heard a stealthy step—someone was looking round. Tom was on like a shot, he caught at a man and tore his trouser—the fellow kicked him, and got off, but Tom had the piece of stuff in his teeth. He wanted to chew it, and was mad, but I got it from him, and handed it over to a clever young police constable. It belongs to the wardrobe of a well-known budmash, who works between here and Poonah—he is watched, and they believe they can trace the thieves. There is no doubt that the gold was taken at Tani-Kul."

"What! No, impossible," said Vernon, rising to his feet.

"Yes, I can tell you it's nearly certain. Another

thing equally certain is, that Rosita ran away early this morning."

Vernon gave a smothered exclamation. "I—I don't believe it. What do you mean?"

"Of course she had confederates who helped her. She climbed out of her window—that was nothing new—got her baggage on a jutka and drove away to the next station, and caught the up-mail for Bombay. Jones the guard saw her, and spoke to her. She was met by a man and woman at Raipore; he said they looked like play actors."

"By George, does anyone else know this?"

"Madame Tanzy knows, of course, and like the astute woman she is, is keeping it dark for the present. The girl went off without giving a hint of her intentions, she left no note—no, not even the conventional letter, but she has collared the grand trousseau, and all the presents."

"And poor old Charlie!" said Vernon, "what about him?"

"Poor old Charlie, indeed! I expect he knows by now; did you ever see anyone so haggard and so changed? One would say he was half starved."

"Yes, his eyes look as if they had been pushed back in his head; his clothes hang on him."

"Rosita has about done for Charlie, and to think of it, Charles Surface—it might have been *your* case."

"That's true, Gojar—I had a narrow squeak."

"I got your head free, thanks to the Persian ring—that was what I wished for you—here in this very shed—'To be delivered from Rosita.'"

"Was it indeed? Then I am sincerely obliged to you. Well, I must be off now, I am on duty at twelve. What you tell me about the specie box I can hardly credit, and as to Rosita——"

"You can believe anything of her! It is my opinion

she has gone to Europe with this travelling company, and if I am not a fool Rosita will be heard of again!" declared Gojar, "but not here. No, she has sucked all amusement out of Tani-Kul, and will try her luck elsewhere—Naples, Marseilles—even Paris itself! A reeking hot Port Said hell, sulphurous and damnable, is her natural destination," and he gave a sudden and discordant laugh—it was not an agreeable sound, it rang in Vernon's ears as he walked away.

* * * * * *

The white glare of an Indian noon beat down upon Tani-Kul, a burning wind sweltered through the station, the rails were scorching hot, and shimmered in the heat haze, and even the lizards palpitated on the palings and the go-down walls.

It was the hour of repose and refreshment, when people knocked off for a spell, traffic was light, the very bookstall was closed.

Mr. Sharratt sat in his office chair, his face stern, his beard firmly grasped in his left hand. Standing around him were assembled several minor officials, and no less than ten (off duty) guards. There was a curiously constrained expression on the faces of most of the company, and the usually wide-open door was shut fast—undoubtedly the station-master was about to make some statement of a grave nature.

"This is a shocking business," he began; "I've heard to-day for a fact that there is now no doubt but that the specie was carried off from this platform. An inspector arrives by the 3.20, and I shall not be surprised if he dismisses the whole staff, lock, stock and barrel, from myself down to Gojar the watchman."

An uncomfortable pause ensued, one or two of the men shifted their positions uneasily.

"Whoever took the box had an accomplice," con-

tinued Sharratt, "and I put it to you all, fair and square, what accomplice is possible—unless a guard? You have everyone been in charge of, and responsible for, specie; and so you know. The police are on the track of the thieves; it is, they believe, a question of hours, and they hope to recover some of the gold—but——" with a gesture of his arms, "whatever is recovered, Tani-Kul as a station, a station that always held itself up on the line as a pattern, and example for straightness, and honesty," here his voice broke, "has, thanks to this infernal business, lost its good name and character."

A dead assenting silence succeeded this painful announcement.

"Before examining your way-books," he pursued, turning in his chair as he spoke, and confronting his subordinates, "has anyone anything to say?"

For a moment there was a dead silence, only broken by a shuffling of boots; at last, to everyone's surprise, Booth came nearer to the table, and in a hoarse voice announced:

"I've got something to say, Governor."

Attention was instantly fastened on the volunteer, and there ensued a momentary pause.

His haggard face was working with emotion, his blue eyes looked desperate and sunken, his hair was matted with perspiration. Oh, what a change in the gallant, handsome Charlie!

"All right, Booth. Go on, man, and don't get flustered," urged the station-master; "you have done the straight thing to come forward—remember you are among friends."

"To begin with, all you fellows," glancing round, "know pretty well how it has been with me, the last few months, and how hard up I am. I've had terrible calls on me," his voice shook as he made this state-

ment, " and—and—and debts—and been desperate—sometimes I had not two annas for my breakfast. I sold my mother's wedding-ring, and everything I could get a price on, and still I had to find money for——" the end of the sentence was conveyed by a gesture. Another pause. Everyone present knew for whom the money had to be forthcoming. " One night, just as we were pulling out of Arconum, a man, a well-dressed chap like a Portuguese, swung into my van after me. I was about to chuck him out, for I had the box of specie aboard, but he clung on for all he was worth, and as I was afraid of an accident, I let him drag himself in, and then abused him, and told him I'd drop him first stop.

" Well, he began to cry—yes, to blub like a woman or a kid. He said mine was the last train for Raichore, and it was a case of life and death—for charity's sake to be merciful, or he would never see his mother alive. Then he told me he was well off, and could afford to pay handsomely; he knew the rules, and that I was risking my post, but the journey meant so much to him, and he would make it well worth my while, and he gave me a note for one hundred rupees. I wanted money badly—it was an awful temptation—and," here his voice dropped to a husky whisper, " I took it! The man was very choop, and no trouble; he sat in the van never stirring, I believed he was asleep. At Raichore he thanked me with sobs and tears in his eyes, and got out—he had no baggage. Well, about a week ago, I saw the same fellow again on the platform at Arconum. This time he came straight up to me and said, ' There are two people in the train—relations—budmashes and enemies, I dare not meet them. You have been so kind, please let me travel with you privately—I did you no harm before, and this time I will give you four hundred rupees.' And I said, ' Come.'

He had a little luggage, a box tied up in a brown rug, with a bundle on top of it; it seemed a good weight, and another man helped him to hoist it in. He gave me four hundred rupee notes and many thanks, and got out here in Tani-Kul—a coolie was waiting, and carried off the box, I now remember in a great hurry, and I know also, that what he really took away was the box of specie. When he travelled the first time, of course, he took size, weight, and all measurements. He had a little book and did this, when I was engaged."

"And he gave you four hundred rupees a week ago," said Sharratt; "what have you done with them, Charlie?"

"I—oh," in a voice of despair, "you all know! I gave them to Rosita Fontaine—they will go for paying her passage home—she—she—she——" then he looked round wildly, with the air of a man distraught; his face was ghastly and rigid, his eyes were mad. At this moment the door opened, and a peon entered with a telegram. Booth turned quickly, pushed violently by him, and rushed out of the office.

Vernon, who was nearest to the door, instantly hurried in his wake; already Booth was running fast, he made straight for the platform, regardless of a warning yell, and with one wild leap cast himself in front of the up-going mail, which, roaring through the station, shook it with its velocity, and cut the victim of Rosita into a hundred pieces.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE tragic ending of Charlie Booth cast a profound gloom over the community of Tani-Kul as the fatal news was whispered from door to door by scared white faces. It passed through the settlement in the nature

of a painful shock, a gust of emotion which affected all, from Sharratt, the head official, to the cheapest water coolie. Such an event was unprecedented; accidents on the line—yes; but a suicide in the very station itself, where, in spite of the most vigorous exertions, certain sinister, if faint, traces of the recent horror, were still to be discerned. The remains of the poor mad fellow were interred the same evening in the little cemetery, and his funeral was attended by a vast crowd. The coffin was completely covered by coloured wreaths (white flowers were almost unknown in the neighbourhood), and everyone present wore some token of mourning, from the men's sleeve bands and Katty Coffey's black thread gloves, to the long crêpe veil, and voluminous cloak, which enshrouded the form of Mrs. Sharratt. As the hard, brick-like earth rattled down on the coffin, many women sobbed audibly, and the Coffey's yellow pariah, who had attended his master, lifted up his head, and howled a dolorous lament.

Among the gathering, Madame Tanzy was nowhere to be seen. That active little matron was ill and prostrate; being well aware that this tribute of general mourning and grief was not merely a token of regret and sympathy for Charlie Booth. It was also a solemn demonstration against her niece Rosita—Rosita, who was morally guilty of the death of the young man. The unfortunate woman was painfully alive to the fact that people shrank away and avoided her company, simply because she was the adopted mother of a girl who had long dominated society, and led many of her young contemporaries into a wilderness of misery and despair. Yet if the community could but realize the truth, no one in all the wide world hated Rosita so bitterly, and whole-heartedly, as her own aunt!

* * * * * *

Tani-Kul had now only too much food for discussion —a runaway bride, an audacious robbery, and a sensational suicide. The station was stirred to its depths, and felt its position acutely. Was not Tani-Kul the talk of the whole line, and every station from Bombay to Madras—Bazaars included? The stricken community clung together for mutual protection and support, ever loyal to their cloth, as is the normal railway attitude. There was no tennis, or even badminton, in these dark days. Men abandoned shooting trips, and collected to discuss matters in the sheds and Institute; women, in couples, paced the neat garden walks, or gathered in groups. They gazed at one another with grave, interrogative eyes, and wondered if there were tidings of Rosita? or the stolen gold. There was no longer occasion to marvel at Charlie Booth's altered spirits, his debts, and his shabby clothes, for he lay under a certain sun-baked mound, with a bunch of withered zinnias on his grave.

At last the gang of thieves was captured, and some of the specie recovered, partly in consequence of the extraordinary exertions of Gajor, night watchman, whose zeal was such that he abandoned his daily rest, and worked through the slums of the Bazaar with the ferocity and determination of an old sleuth hound, a tireless tracker, with a fat fox-terrier ever at his heels, who only occasionally turned aside to manifest his hatred of a resident Bazaar cat.

And then by very gradual degrees, the dejected junction resumed its poise, and its normal condition. Nowhere else, as in India, does society so speedily recover from the shattering shocks of scandals and tragedies; yet it is not that these are not felt most poignantly at the moment, nor that help and sympathy are ever withheld. Indeed, in what country are both so bountiful? But here, there is no time to stand

still, and contemplate disasters; events march rapidly. India is the land of change, of moving on. Are we not here to-day, and gone to-morrow?

A whole month had elapsed since the dramatic mid-day scene in the station-master's office, and Vernon found himself once more summoned into that well-known room. It might be his fancy, but it suddenly struck the young man as he stood before Sharratt, that his hair and beard had become a shade whiter. These last weeks had aged him visibly.

"I say, Vernon," he said, "I believe you know almost every guard up and down, and in Tani-Kul. Have you ever come across a chap called," reading, "J. H. V. Sacheverell-Talbot? Now there's a name for you!"

"So it is, sir; it is my own."

"Why, what the deuce——" clutching his beard and staring hard at the guard.

"Talbot is my real name; Vernon is only one of the string. It was easier to say than 'Sacheverell-Talbot.'"

"So I should suppose. Well, I don't like this changing of names, though it comes natural enough to women. Here are two letters for you. One has a crown on it, too," handing them over with deliberation.

Lord Rotherham's despatch had come at last. Vernon took it away with him, into the now empty first-class waiting-room, and there devoured it greedily. The writing was exceedingly difficult to decipher; the epistle was written either under great stress of emotion or in a mad fury—no, not in a fury. It said:

"DEAR JOHN,—

"I have received Linda's confession, which comes better late than never, and I do not know how to express myself to you, nor to assure you of the depth of shame and remorse to which my own daughter has

hurled me. As a boy, frankly, I never liked you; as a man, I feel confident that I shall do so. You have worked hard, and kept a clean name, and good place in the world, even in the face of enormous disadvantages. I have often feared that I had been too harsh and hasty, and wished to find you; but we lost all trace at Durban, and believed that you were dead. Your father's estate has had a piece of unexpected good fortune. Some of the wild-cat investments have sprung up, and for the last two years I've been receiving three hundred pounds on your behalf, so that you are not penniless; besides which, I hope you will permit me to do something for you—my only brother's only son; and candidly, I am anxious to make restitution. The post of agent to the estate would suit you, with a house and a thousand pounds a year. You are now a practical man, and understand business methods, and have a wide experience. You can hunt, and shoot, as much as you like. Perry is too delicate for field sports—and spends half his life at foreign cures. He is extraordinarily nervous with respect to his health; he seems to think his days are numbered, but I do not agree with this; the Talbots are a long-lived race. Anyway, after Perry, you are my heir, and under any circumstances, I intend to provide for you at my death, and, should you marry, propose to make a handsome settlement on your wife. I hope, John, that you will take this letter as it is meant—return home, and let bygones be bygones. You will not readily forget your hard life as a railway guard, but no doubt it has formed and strengthened your character. Colonel Arminger wrote me a most warm letter, informing me of your excellent record and your staunch friends. I sincerely hope you will forgive me. Your father, were he alive, would find it hard to do so. Your aunt is as usual, and desires her love. If there are any quaint

thimbles in your part of the world pray bring her some specimens. She says she understands that the natives wear them on their *toes*. I have lodged three hundred pounds by telegram to Grindley's, and hope to see you here long before the pheasant shooting.

"I am,

"Your affectionate uncle,

"ROTHERHAM."

Vernon read this over twice, then he hurried into the telegraph office and despatched two messages. Number one was addressed to "Miss Arminger, Fair Lawn, Ootacamund. Letter received satisfactory, am bringing it up to-morrow.—TALBOT." Number two to "Lord Rotherham, Caversham Castle. Many thanks for letter, writing.—TALBOT." Having despatched these important wires, he went into the station, where he encountered Sharratt.

"Can I have a week's leave, sir, to go to Ootacamund to-morrow?"

"Leave? Why, you are only a month back! Well, I suppose so; we must get used to doing without you, Vernon—or what's the other name?"

"Oh, Vernon is all right here, always."

"So you will soon be leaving us altogether?"

"Yes, I believe so."

"And we shall miss you on the line, and in the Institute. The cricket will go to pieces, and Mrs. Coffey will break her heart."

"I hope not. I want to get home by the 1st of October if I can."

"We will be terribly short-handed, what with you and poor Booth gone. I suppose it's all square with your governor now?"

"My father is dead—years ago. If he had been alive, you'd never have seen me."

"And the Company would have lost a first-rate guard!"

"As it is, my uncle made a mistake about me, and now he has found it out at last."

"Well, *I* should say it was not easy to make a mistake about you, my boy. I liked you the very moment I first set eyes on you."

"It's very kind of you to say so, Mr. Sharratt."

"Not at all; it's but the truth. And now before you go back to your own compartment as first-class traveller, you must come in this evening and take a bit of supper with Mrs. Sharratt and me. I'll ask the Hollands, and old Gibson and Pereira, the Wilsons and the Vicars, and we will have a jollification, drink your health, and wish you the best of luck."

CHAPTER XXXIII

LORD ROTHERHAM'S letter was the signal for his nephew's retirement as a railway employé from Tani-Kul. He discarded coat and badge and promptly set out for the blue mountains. The "three or four days'" leave to Ootacamund expanded into four weeks, during which time Vernon's quarters were at Fair Lawn, where he was installed as the future son-in-law of Colonel Arminger.

Undoubtedly his income was moderate, but he was well-born; and on the whole Colonel Arminger was satisfied to give Beatrice to the nephew of his old friend—especially as he particularly liked the young man. He was modest, straightforward, and a fine rider; he and "Jack," as he called him without effort, had more in common than most "in-laws." They met on the mutual ground of the hunting field, the turf, and tobacco.

For her part Mrs. Arminger was enchanted when she realized that she was getting Beatrice off her hands, and although she cast many regretful thoughts to £30,000 a year and the Napier car (their owner had shaken the red dust of India from his feet immediately after Wellington races), yet if this young man was not wealthy, at least he was popular, good-looking, and had prospects; a far more agreeable person to pass one's life with than Sir Granville Boggin, whose selfishness, and ill-temper, were a proverb. Ootacamund society smiled on the engagement; it presented a flavour of romance, which appealed to its taste. Engagements and weddings were not uncommon events up in the blue mountains, but for one of the season's beauties to become the *fiancée* of a young man who for years had been a mere guard on the Madras Railway, who had only recently doffed belt and ticket-puncher, frankly there was a piquancy about this which people thoroughly enjoyed.

And then, he was a gentleman, and highly connected. It was said that his uncle, Lord Rotherham, was ready to receive him with open arms, and provide handsomely for his future bride. But why had this promising individual buried himself under another name in a railway van? This was the oft-discussed question to which Ooty was burning to hear the answer, but few were favoured with the facts. Among these Lady Southminster was included. She immediately descended on the Dove-cot with truly feline ferocity, and made Mrs. Seymour-Wenslade an awful scene; vainly that lady endeavoured to present a bold front, but for once she had met an opponent who carried too many claws.

"Abominable woman!" concluded her visitor, in her high falsetto voice—an aged voice—"you really ought to be imprisoned, and you shall certainly be *cut*

by all my set. I remember the occasion perfectly, when there was the uproar about the miniatures, and you sat there like a graven image with the money actually in your pocket—you, who had stolen the things, and allowed that miserable boy to be your scapegoat, to be ruined and driven out of the country, whilst you flourished, spent your ill-gotten gains, and married a rich man. Oh!" and she paused for breath. "Well, now it is John's turn—he has shown a lot of grit, self-control and patience. You cheated him, you had all the cards, but I think you will find that he has wound up with the Grand Slam!" and Lady Southminster, rustling with agitation, and indignation, swept out.

Mrs. Seymour-Wenslade began to experience a sudden lowering of the social temperature; it may have been merely imagination, or a guilty conscience—only that the lady was minus a conscience, guilty or otherwise. Lady Southminster was now her openly declared enemy, the Armingers "were Durwaza Bund" when she had called, although she had written the letter that was bound to invoke a storm of paternal fury on her head. She had a conviction that people avoided her, and looked away nervously when she approached to speak to them. Ooty became odious, the air from the lake gave her neuralgia, and Mrs. Wenslade decided to shift her sky. She suggested to her husband that she was sick of India and dying to see Japan, and to Japan they presently took their departure.

As Mrs. and Miss Bertram were returning to England early in October, it had been arranged that Beatrice was to accompany them. She wished to be married at home, and as Talbot was to be one of the party, they were, as Miss Bertram gaily expressed it, "Going to make the whole journey, *in charge of the guard!*"

The little company decided to stop at Tani-Kul for

twenty-four hours, where Talbot could wind up his affairs, and take leave of old associates, and Beatrice expressed an earnest desire not only to see Mary Holland, but to make the acquaintance of the owners of various names, that were at present mere empty sounds to her. She was anxious to familiarize herself with the place where Jack had lived and worked: the Institute, the Settlement, and the surrounding country, so that when they talked together of India in days to come, she would be able to meet him half-way. The little party was reinforced by Mr. Pascoe, who unexpectedly joined it at Jolapett, and expressed his intention of accompanying the ladies to Bombay. When at last the travellers steamed into Tani-Kul, it was astonishing what a number of idle lookers-on happened to be on the platform, as the late guard and his friends descended from the dusty train. It might have been a troop special!

The Bertrams found excellent quarters in the railway station, which provided comfortable sleeping accommodation. Miss Arminger was, of course, the Hollands' guest, and her *fiancé*, equally of course, dined with them, retiring at a very late hour to his old room in the Coffey house, where Katty and the yellow "Pi" were sitting up to receive him.

"I must see your young lady," announced Katty, "and have a word with her. Thank God, the other did not pin on to ye! Wait till I tell this wan the lucky girl she is to get the likes of ye!"

"No, no, you will do nothing of the sort, Mrs. Coffey," he protested. "The luck is all the other way. To-morrow morning I will bring Miss Arminger round. She is most anxious to see you—she knows how good you've been to *me*."

"Ah, balderskins! 'tis easy to be good to some!"

"I'll have my breakfast at six; same as if I was on

duty, but I shall not want my dinner-tin again!" and he laughed as he bade her good-night.

"God bless the boy!" she exclaimed, and suddenly taking him by the neck, she administered a succession of hearty kisses.

It was a glorious Eastern night, and Vernon stood on the upper verandah, looking out over a familiar scene, the far-stretching plains, their barren solemnity emphasized by the ghostly illumination of a cold-weather moon. The prospect summoned many memories, and as he had no inclination to sleep, he fetched a chair, lit a cherrot, and abandoned himself to reflection.

Just a year ago, from that self-same spot he had hurried forth in search of solitude, and in order that he might feast his thoughts upon Rosita. Yes, he had been mad! It was an obsession—and where was Rosita now? Driving other men to destruction and death? He glanced instinctively towards a certain corner, and an empty cot, and recalled poor Charlie Booth. He had been in every sense a human sacrifice. How different his own fate—his name cleared—his exile at an end.

* * * * * *

Gojar no longer kept guard in the shed, he had recently retired into private life and to the amazement of his colleagues had actually declined a small pension. He still dwelt in the Bazaar, from whence he had despatched a "chit" to his only friend; its tone was both brief and imperious.

"Bring her to the Garden to-morrow at four o'clock. I will be there. "G."

Talbot had never imparted the story of "G." to

Beatrice, merely told her that an eccentric Englishman was watchman in the goods shed, that he dressed as a native, and that he and Gojar were rather pals.

Beatrice had expressed her determination to make his acquaintance.

"Of course he has a story, Jack—some reason for his disguise—perhaps I can help him? I feel now as if I wanted to try and help everyone," and she turned to her lover with dancing eyes.

"I suppose so," he assented, "because you have made such a capital start with me! But I'm afraid old Gojar is beyond your reach. He is satisfied—that makes a difference."

"Satisfied!" she echoed, "satisfied—to be an imitation native! The poor fellow must be out of his mind."

The morning succeeding her arrival at Tani-Kul proved a busy one for Miss Arminger. There were various visits to be paid, notably to Mrs. Coffey. Afterwards, as the air of the plains was unexpectedly fresh and crisp—the cold weather being at hand—she and her friends penetrated on foot to the teeming Bazaar. Here were no "Europe" shops, but little English spoken—as in Ooty and Madras—narrow streets were choked with a crowd of tame animals, half-naked, shaven men, and chattering women in gay sarees; at last the explorers were face to face with India herself! A curious mixture of East and West. On one hand, a Dirzee was working a Singer's sewing machine, and close by, some devotees were offering a cock and flowers to Durga the Terrible, and Ganesh, the portly Elephant God. Here were prancing, hooting boys, painted as tigers, fighting quails in covered cages, fakirs with matted hair, and iron-spiked collars, sacred Brahmanee cattle thrusting their damp noses into the Bunnias' grain baskets—altogether, it was a scene of

bewildering novelty to Beatrice and Miss Bertram; and in spite of the increasing heat and anxious expostulations, they remained bargaining at various stalls. Brass lotahs, huka heads, embroidered cloths, glass bangles, brass gods, betel-nut bags were among the articles wrapped in flimsy pink paper, with which the men were laden when at last the ladies consented to return to the Settlement, there to enjoy a well-earned rest.

Four o'clock, and the Institute Garden was still empty, as Talbot and his *fiancée* entered it together in search of a certain native, attended by a white dog.

"Gojar never shows by day," explained Talbot. "This is an immense compliment to you; you see, he could not well invite you to the goods shed, or into his den in the Bazaar! I say, who is this stranger sitting over there? Some new Johnny!"

A tall, erect man, wearing dark clothes, and a soft felt hat, came slowly towards them. Gojar in European kit? Incredible! but so it was. His get-up, boots, collar, tie, were all perfectly new, and perfectly correct—his manners were to correspond. This was not the rude, grim, jeering watchman of the goods shed!

"How are you?" he said, taking off his hat. "And this is Miss Arminger? Miss Arminger," and his voice shook, "do you know that I have not spoken to an English girl face to face for more than twenty years?"

"It is very good of you to wish to see me," she answered.

"The kindness is entirely on your side in consenting to give me a rendezvous. Talbot and I are friends. He saved my life, he has helped and cheered me, and raised me out of the dust of a self-indulgent existence. He—" laying his hand heavily on Talbot's shoulder, "is my *heir*."

"Oh, not really?" she answered breathlessly.

"Yes, an heir I am proud of. With every disadvantage at the start, he has struggled on in the straight course—and come in a winner. I, who had everything he lacked, indulgence, credit, money, and encouragement, have been left at the post. All my own fault—that is the bitter, bitter truth," and he lifted his eyes to hers, with the mute pathos of defeat. "I wish to make him an allowance and he won't take it—now I want you to help me persuade him."

"No, no, we shall do very well," she protested. "We are not extravagant, and we will enjoy managing. We really could not accept it—we would rather not be rich."

"Rather not be rich!" he repeated; "what an astonishing statement. Well then, I hope you *will* accept this—my wedding-gift," and he produced the old Persian's ring.

"Thank you," she murmured, "I shall treasure it always. It looks very old."

"Old, but not of any special value, yet it possesses one property far above rubies. Talbot knows, and will tell you. I have tested it on your behalf, and I hope my last wish may be granted."

"It is *my* wish that you would chuck all this, and come home, Gojar," suddenly interposed Talbot. "Clear out of Tani-Kul and return with us—or follow in the next steamer. Why not?"

"Yes—do, Mr. Gojar," echoed Beatrice.

"No, no, my dear young lady, the East and its customs are in my blood. Were I to return to England, her voice would be always in my ears a-calling. I put on this dress to meet you—to-morrow I resume my turban and slippers. As for 'Mr. Gojar!'"—a swift spasm passed over his face—"my real name is Algernon Craven, a name that has not passed my lips for years.

I tell it to you, Miss Arminger, that you may sometimes think of it, and remember it in your prayers."

A pause, and in another tone he added, "And so you leave to-night for England?"

"Yes, by the six-twenty," replied Talbot, with professional promptitude.

"And I shall never see either of you again?"

"I am afraid not—unless you come home."

"My home, as I have told you, is out here—and see, the tennis people are swarming in, our little world is arriving, and I must depart. No doubt they wonder who the stranger may be? Well, one thing is certain, they will not suspect me, and will never have another opportunity of seeing the original Algy Craven."

As he spoke, he took Beatrice's and Talbot's hands in his, and looked into their faces fixedly; there seemed to be a mist in his sunken eyes, of which he was ashamed, for suddenly relaxing his clasp, he turned and abruptly left them.

* * * * * *

Not many months after this parting in an Indian garden, the following paragraph appeared in the *Times*:

"The death is announced at Tani-Kul, Madras Presidency, of the Honourable Algernon Craven, only son of the late Lord Parland, and grandson of the Earl of Shorncliffe, formerly in the Paladin Lancers. He was of peculiar and eccentric character, and for many years had conformed to the dress and habits of his adopted country. He leaves a considerable estate, valued at £130,000, a large amount of which is willed unconditionally to J. S. Talbot, Esq., nephew to Lord Rotherham, whose acquaintance he had made in the East."

Tom survived his master, and travelled comfortably to England in charge of the ship's butcher, to find a congenial home with his former acquaintance. To see Tom in a certain smoking-room, luxuriously extended on a skin rug before a coal fire, who would dream of his nightly vigils in the goods shed? his days in an Indian Bazaar? If dogs talk to one another—and it is believed that they do argue, sympathize, and gossip—how he must have bragged of his adventures! What shocking tales he may have related to two prim Aberdeens and a pink-eyed bull terrier!

Jack and Beatrice, who had been happily married for some years, had run over to Paris with the Pascoes and Captain Breakspeare, to "do" the theatres, the Salon, and possibly a little shopping. One evening Tony invited the Talbots to accompany him to a celebrated theatre, near the Champs Elysées, where a variety entertainment was the attraction. At first, the place was barely three parts full, but after a few "turns" there came a sudden influx; it seemed as if an avalanche of people had poured precipitately into the boxes and stalls: they even stood four deep in the passages.

"I suppose something extraordinary is coming," said Beatrice, consulting her programme, "No. 11—La Sauterelle."

"Oh, yes," explained Tony, "La Sauterelle is the dancer that all Paris is going mad about. La Sauterelle is the latest craze; the most outrageously extravagant and popular danseuse of the day. A splendid flat, half a dozen motors, magnificent jewels have ruined several well-known individuals. Her fascinations are said to be irresistible, her beauty is of an unique type, her dancing something entirely beyond description! Ah, here she comes!"

As he spoke, the curtain was slowly raised, to dis-

play a gilded sedan chair being carried on to the stage by liveried men; when the chair was set down and opened out tripped—Rosita—Rosita of Tani-Kul!—Talbot recognized her instantly—so did his wife.

"Oh, do look at the Tani-Kul beauty," she whispered excitedly, "you know, I met her at Mary's, and her aunt, Madame Tanzy, boasted of her dancing, and I said I'd like so much to see her dance. Fancy her being in Paris—a star here!"

"A star indeed!"

Talbot raised his glasses, and steadily surveyed his first love. Her face was harder and more self-confident; but lovely with the kind of beauty that is rare, and challenges the stare of eyes, and the glare of the lime-light. She wore a short dress of silver tissue and a scarlet wreath; the bodice of her gown was a blaze of diamonds, they scintillated in her hair, and on her neck, and arms. The band struck up a few gay bars and she commenced to dance. She danced with the abandon, the buoyant grace, the daring emphasis, of a finished artiste (she also held the palms of her hands upwards in true Nautch-girl fashion!), and if her attitudes lacked the fire and personality of Tani-Kul, Rosita had gained in finish and expression; her movements embodied the voluptuousness of passion—the lure of the enchantress.

When the performance came to an end, and the strains of an exquisite string band had ceased, the audience rose at La Sauterelle and acclaimed her vociferously; precisely as a less experienced gathering had done years previously, in a bare little theatre in India. They tossed her bouquets, and gifts, which she collected with enchanting smiles, and languid leisured movements.

"Do you know who she reminds me of?" said Tony. "Why that girl in the pink muslin hat at your station,

Jack. Surely there are not two such pairs of eyes in all the world?"

"It is the girl herself—Rosita," replied Talbot.

"Oh, I remember her well—and I thought at the time she would go far."

"She seems to have arrived," said Beatrice, her eyes fixed on the dazzling figure behind the footlights.

"I believe Jack admired her at one time!" declared Breakspeare, with a broad grin. "I felt quite uneasy, though he kept it very dark. Come now, Jack, own up!"

"For that matter, I admire her still," he admitted, "though she devastated Tani-Kul!" and his thoughts flew to her many victims—Madame Tanzy, Simpson, Jones, Booth, Coquellino—all sacrificed to the local idol! and yielding up love, money, honour, morals and life.

"She danced by nature," he continued, "and had the real flair and gift; she was always ambitious, and longed to be a celebrity."

"Then, by Jove, she has got all she wanted!" murmured Tony. "Her immorality is notorious and unimpeachable, and they say she is going to marry that young fool, the Duc de Dindon, the fellow in the stage box just going away."

"Poor devil!" ejaculated Talbot. "Bee," turning to his wife, "if you have had enough of it, shall we depart? Tony, will you get our carriage?"

A few minutes later, as Mr. and Mrs. Talbot waited together in the entrance, under the full electric light a splendid motor glided slowly by. There was a block in the traffic, and they caught a glimpse of the occupants, a man and a woman—the woman was on the near side. She turned, and they saw her dark eyes glittering under a red wreath, then the eyes descried them, and blazed into sudden recognition.

